

**be**

**me**

**us**



be.

(your collection) be remembered

## welcome.

We are proud to be launching Lake Macquarie City Council's redeveloped and rebranded art gallery as MAC: Museum of Art and Culture yapang, Lake Macquarie. The project has been in development since 2015 and made possible through the generous support of the NSW State Government's Regional Cultural Fund.

The three exhibitions on display show the direction MAC yapang will take to support Council's Arts Heritage and Cultural Plan by presenting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander programming, curating contemporary art exhibitions, supporting the creation of new artwork and making the collection accessible to our community.

The last three years have been exceptional in Lake Macquarie for the development of arts and culture. Alongside MAC yapang – the first of the major infrastructure projects – we can look forward to more urban and public art, our new Multi-Arts Place opening in Speers Point, Rathmines Theatre, Windale Library and Community Centre, and Cameron Park Library Museum that will be delivered over the next five years.

I hope you enjoy the new space and I look forward to seeing the community make the most of our beautiful art museum by participating in its programs and joining in its many events for years to come.

**Clr Kay Fraser**

Mayor, Lake Macquarie City

## foreword.

Bequests form an important part of an art museum's collection as, more often than not, the donor has had a connection with either the institution or place. This is true of the two bequests celebrated in *be. (your collection) be remembered* – the Shirley Firkin Bequest and the Ruth Spenser Komon Bequest.

In our 40th year, and the one in which we become MAC: Museum of Art and Culture ▲ yapang, Lake Macquarie, an exhibition acknowledging the generosity of individuals in supporting public cultural collection through bequest and gifts is apt as one of the three at the reopening. The exhibition also firmly states the importance of the collection – your collection – in our programming.

Dr Caleb Firkin's connections go as far back as 1927, when his grandparents built their residence, Awaba House, on the site. He was also a president and life member of the MAC Society (former Gallery Society). Sadly Dr Firkin passed way in 2018, but the Firkin legacy lives on through the significant works in this generous bequest, kindly facilitated by his son Paul and made in memory of his wife, Shirley, the instigator of their collection.

The Ruth Spenser Komon Bequest comprises seven works by Sir William Dobell, including a late self-portrait. Dobell was a well-known Lake Macquarie resident until his death in 1970. Rudy Komon, as well as being the artist's art dealer, was a good friend, along with his wife, Ruth Spenser Komon. The connection resulted in this significant bequest.

A heartfelt thanks goes to those remarkable individuals who had the foresight and community-mindedness to donate works from their private collections to a public institution and therefore give public access through exhibition and research. Also thanks to Damian Smith, who came on board to curate the works with a fresh and contemporary view, contributing a fine essay to accompany Scott Bevan's reflective personal one; to Rob Cleworth for his informed work on the exhibition project and the collection; and to Stephen Goddard for his elegant catalogue design.

We are excited to see these works together for the first time in our new space and look forward to sharing it with you. ▲

**Debbie Abraham**

Director

MAC: Museum of Art and Culture ▲ yapang, Lake Macquarie

collecting for now and for the future.

damian smith

*In 2001, my wife and I were visiting Lake Macquarie City Art Gallery where we met Caleb Firkin, this engaging man with movie star looks and a mellifluous voice that made words sound delicious. Caleb was generous with everything he had: his wine collection; his art collection, which he had bequeathed to the Lake Macquarie gallery in memory of his wife; his time; and, his heart.*

SCOTT BEVAN. 'DINING ON THE JOY, AND THE MEANING, OF LIFE'.  
NEWCASTLE HERALD SUN. 28 APRIL 2018

*In 2002 Ruth Spenser Komon generously bequeathed a number of paintings by William Dobell. Ruth and Rudy Komon were long-time friends as well as art dealers for Dobell. Spenser Komon wanted the works to go to a gallery in the region in which Dobell made his home and studio for several years before his passing.*

LAKE MACQUARIE CITY ART GALLERY

Public art collections play an enormous role in the production of cultural and civic life. They are one of the jewels of local communities, oftentimes flourishing as drawcards when other more fleeting attractions subside. However, public art collections are not merely for leisure or enjoyment. They represent concepts, traditions and beliefs in ways that are more immediate than words alone can affect.

The material presence of the artworks enables a space for contemplation that is alternately solitary and shared with others. This communality connects individuals to their social milieu and beyond; it connects communities to wider national experiences. Art collections link people to their histories through the works of specific artists, and in making those connections it enables discourse about the present and a space to imagine the future. The discussions that ensue are grounded in the material artefacts of the past, and in the beliefs and perceptions of the artists who brought those objects into being.

Through providing a reflective and subjective set of impressions, art collections are a part of that acknowledged 'third sector' that sits apart from business and government and is sometimes identified as 'civil society'. This in turn makes art collections one of those vitalising factors that reveal the interconnectedness of all spheres of society and the interests of those within it.

Surprisingly, however, the development of lasting public art collections does not always occur through the implementation of administrative policies and guidelines. Rather, it is the benefaction of those passionate lovers of art, those 'untrained' aficionados and exuberant collectors, that result in the emergence of collections that are sometimes more complex, more wide-reaching and more intriguing than the doctrinaire selection of the professional curator. Indeed, it is very often the case that the inclusion of works by lesser known artists, as is often the case in private collections, provides an opportunity to appreciate the historical realities of taste, place and perceptions that the exclusive selection of artworks by the already received and the famous might otherwise suggest. Yet one can only experience such holdings if the collector is sufficiently generous of spirit to give their collection away.

Such is the case with Lake Macquarie's collection of mid-20th century Australian art. Here one sees both the generosity and period taste of two significant donors – Dr Caleb Firkin (1925–2018), and Mrs Ruth Spenser Komon (1928–2001). Both individuals were passionate about the art that they acquired, and in both instances, the process of selection was not theirs alone. Rather, the method of acquisition emerged in the context of their respective marriages.

Caleb Firkin was introduced to the possibilities of art by his future wife, the 'golden-haired goddess' Shirley McCoy. One of their first moments of courtship included a trip to the Art Gallery of New South Wales to see William Dobell's controversial win in the Archibald Prize. That well-known painting was Dobell's *Mr Joshua Smith*, 1943; and in fortuitous circumstances, Caleb and Shirley later befriended Dobell, who also resided at Lake Macquarie.

In contrast, Ruth Spenser Komon was the more retiring partner of her exuberant, art dealer husband, Rudolph John 'Rudy' Komon (1908–1982). Born in Vienna to Czech parents, Komon was a *bon vivant*; a larger than life art dealer and cellar master of the Wine and Food Society of New South Wales from 1956 to 1976. Komon was a major figure in Australian art, bringing artists to prominence at a time when art as a concept had scarcely been adopted in wider Australian society. It is noteworthy also that Rudy Komon was the art dealer for that artist whose paintings helped to stimulate Caleb and Shirley's relationship and interest in art; the self-same William Dobell. In the early phase of his professional life in Australia, Komon would sell rugs and Meissen porcelain from an antique shop in the Sydney suburb of Waverly, while simultaneously 'hawking' William Dobell paintings from the boot of his car.

#### Sir William Dobell

born 1899 Newcastle, NSW  
died 1970 Lake Macquarie, NSW

*Mahme and tamba player* 1953  
oil on board  
16.1 x 20.2cm  
Bequest from the Estate of  
Ruth Spenser Komon, 2002  
Cultural Collections,  
Lake Macquarie  
Reproduced courtesy of the  
Sir William Dobell Foundation





#### Elwyn Lynn

born 1917 Canowindra, NSW  
died 1997 Sydney, NSW

*Grey Segment* 1966  
mixed media on canvas  
76.5 x 10.1 cm  
The Shirley Firkin Bequest, 2019  
Cultural Collections,  
Lake Macquarie  
Photographer Dean Beletich  
© Elwyn Lynn/  
Copyright Agency 2019

The Komons and the Firkins represent a particular class of connoisseur collector that, perhaps because of their scarcity, provided a much-needed injection of confidence into the art scene of Australia during the mid-20th century. Their common interests in food and wine as well as art and the broader dimensions of human cultures and civilisations underpinned the development of their collections, and, in the case of Komon, the creation of the first commercial gallery in the Sydney suburb of Paddington, a location that is nowadays thick with many similar establishments.

Perusing the collection at Lake Macquarie, one enters both the world of these collectors but also the territory of Australian artistic interests at the end of a period that is widely referred to as Modernism. However, as the Australian art historian Bernard Smith once observed, Australian art, while being of *its time* in Australia, was not always in sync with the kinds of art being produced in other parts of the world. In effect, the island continent's great distance from neighbouring countries was reflected in the production of its artists.

Where Conceptualism was the leading edge of art in the United States of America, for instance, Australian painters maintained a strong attachment to the visible. Within the collection, even those exceptions to the figurative tradition, such as John Coburn, Tom Gleghorn, Margo Lewers and Elwyn Lynn, enact modes

of painting that are poised between abstraction and landscape, so much so that a sense of place is not difficult to perceive. Elwyn Lynn, for instance, was much influenced by the work of the Catalan artist Antonio Tàpies (1923–2012) and the palpable materiality of his otherwise two-dimensional pieces.

In contrast, the work of Norman Lindsay (1879–1969) represents something of a polar opposite to Lynn. Norman Lindsay's sexed-up fantasias seem to have more in common with the Hollywood sets of film director Cecil B. DeMille (1881–1959) than with Lindsay's localised Australian world, though this did not prevent him being lauded by conservative interests. In many respects Lindsay and Lynn, who was the Curator of the Power Gallery of Contemporary Art at Sydney University between 1969 and 1983, represent the broader parameters of this part of the collection.

William Dobell (1899–1970) stands as that breakthrough artist who, via an expressionist mode of painting, scandalised 1940s Australia. In comparison, the artist Brett Whiteley (1939–1992), who is also represented in the collection with the lithograph *Swinging Monkey 3*, 1965, came to represent a new kind of Australian painting. Via an opiate-induced morphology Whiteley's work hovers between the oblivion of 'field painting' abstraction and the depiction of visible things.

**Margaret Olley**

born 1923 Kyogle, NSW  
died 2011 Sydney, NSW

*Diana and Daturas* 1963  
oil on hardboard  
60 x 75cm

The Shirley Firkin Bequest, 2019  
Cultural Collections,  
Lake Macquarie  
Reproduced courtesy of  
Margaret Olley Art Trust

In thematic terms, one is also struck by both the influence of and interest in 'Primitivism' as an aesthetic point of view. This includes William Dobell's small, late painting *Mahme and Tamba Player*, 1954; the work emerged from two trips by the artist to New Guinea in 1949 and 1950. Dobell's image of a naked woman of Papua appears not only as 'exotic', but rather as a dream-like scene made all the more mysterious by the accompanying presence of the moon. There is wonder here but also a feeling of anthropologic study that does not advance beyond a representation of otherness seen through the eyes of a European. In comparison, another painting of an Indigenous woman is Margaret Olley's *Diana and Daturas*, 1963. However, unlike the Dobell, Olley's painting is a portrait that conveys an intimacy between artist and sitter.

Different again is the view in Ray Croke's *Dance at Aroona*, 1965. Croke stands at a distance from his swaying Indigenous subjects, depicting both the traditional dancers and their gathering spectators. By placing himself at a 'double distance' from his subject, Croke highlights perhaps his own self-conscious awareness of being a witness but not a participant in a culture about which he makes no particular claim. In contrast, both Graham Gilchrist and Tom Gleghorn have produced sculptural works that suggest an

archaic or antique past – two evocations of that Modernist mode by which something old points to newness and edgy difference.

That fascination with the 'primitive' is unsurprising in a colonial country like Australia and in many respects the works seen here point to a range of nuanced responses that go beyond a singular appropriation of culture or an objectifying and gendered gaze. The pejorative implications of the 'primitive' remain nonetheless problematic; indeed, it would not be too long before a major reassessment would lead to broader repositioning of cultures other than those of Europe and America.

Curiously, the mid-20th century fascination with 'the other' also included such figures as the potter Harold Hughan (1893–1987), a pioneer of the Anglo-Oriental aesthetic in the production of functional tableware. Hughan's large stoneware platter reveals his appreciation of Japanese pottery. The floral motif at the centre of Hughan's platter is entirely understated when contrasted with Hatton and Lucy Beck's more exuberant 'centrepiece' platter, which bursts with energy and colour. Here, too, one perceives great interest in a pre-industrial or 'artisan' past.

Significantly, the mid-20th century Australian artworks in Lake Macquarie's collection do not





present an untrammelled history of Australian society; they are reflective of a period of cultural and economic development, which, in Australia, cannot be separated from collisions and entanglements between Indigenous and settler cultures that commenced in the colonial period. The development of the collection, including the transference of artworks from generous private benefactors like Caleb Firkin and Ruth Spenser Komon, represents a major cultural asset that reflects Australia's artistic culture in the mid-20th century. ▲

**Dr Damian Smith, 2019**  
Curator, Academic, Arts Writer  
Secretary International Association of Art Critics  
(UNESCO Sponsored)

**Robert Dickerson**

born 1924 Sydney, NSW  
died 2015 Nowra, NSW

*Boy and Blue Background* c. 1966  
oil on hardboard  
74.5 x 59.0cm  
The Shirley Firkin Bequest, 2019  
Cultural Collections,  
Lake Macquarie  
Reproduced courtesy  
of Jennifer Dickerson



long live the art of sharing.

scott bevan

**W**alking around the charred skeleton of Awaba House, I'm grateful Caleb Firkin isn't here to see this. As a doctor who had devoted his life to healing, Caleb would have been weeping at such loss.

As a man besotted with beauty and creativity, standing before such destruction would have broken his heart.

And Caleb would have had to confront the fact that a part of his past had gone up in flames.

When fire tore through Awaba House in August 2019, the lake community lost a historic landmark. The Firkin family lost a link to their own story.

For this was the house Caleb's grandfather, the eminent lawyer Thomas Braye, built almost a century ago. This was where, during visits to his grandparents as a little boy, Caleb fell in love with the lake. This was where Caleb's eyes were opened to so much natural beauty. The boy delighted in climbing the great old fig tree out front, gazing through the curtain of leaves to the water.

The big fig tree is still here, but its branches now throw shade over a shell of a house and the ashes of memories. Beyond the gracious curve of the portico, the front door opens to destruction.

Yet being the relentlessly optimistic and happy character he was, Caleb would have looked beyond Awaba House to the neighbouring building. He would have gazed from the ruins of the past to the place that holds his legacy, the newly named MAC: Museum of Art and Culture ▲ yapang, Lake Macquarie.

Caleb's medical career was shaped by the Hippocratic Oath. But standing here, I can almost hear Caleb, in that luscious baritone voice of his, invoking other words attributed to Hippocrates.

'Life is short, the art long.'

Caleb Lawry Firkin died in April 2018, aged 93.

The world had lost one of those wonderful souls who had not only lived beautifully but had helped make others' lives more beautiful.

Caleb was a sensual man. And, by the way he lived, he aroused and enriched the senses of those around him. He loved the sound of classical music, which he would play on his stereo at a volume that would make a hard rock band wince. He loved the bouquet and taste of fine wine. He loved reciting carefully crafted words, be it a sonnet by Shakespeare or an A.D. Hope poem. And he loved looking at art.

What he saw, and how he saw, was a part of who he was, and a part of how those of us who love Caleb saw him.

Little wonder he loved art. For art played a key role in Caleb's courting of his 'golden-haired goddess' and wife of almost half a century, Shirley. In early 1944, when Caleb was a medical student in Sydney, this girl he was keen on wanted to go and see a controversial painting that everyone was talking about. It was the winning portrait of the Archibald Prize, and it had been painted by William Dobell. As Caleb would admit, he didn't know much about art, and he wasn't that keen on it. But he was really keen on Shirley, so he took her to the Art Gallery of NSW.

That day, Caleb Firkin fell in love with art. He was beguiled by the power of marks on canvas or board to convey our deepest feelings, to give colour and shape to our thoughts. And he fell even deeper in love with Shirley.

As Caleb told me of that day, 'That's where it started. The love of art.'

After Caleb graduated, he and Shirley married and moved north to his hometown of Newcastle. They built a life together, a family, with the birth of son Paul, and a collection of Australian art.

Even the house they built at Fishing Point in the mid-1970s was, in some respects, built for art. Designed by the acclaimed Newcastle architect, Brian Suters, the house was a work of art in itself. Brian had to take into account the Firkins' growing collection, particularly one monumental work

called *Pompeii*, by a Lake Macquarie-raised artist who would go on to be a force in abstract painting in post-war Australia, Tom Gleghorn. The lounge room was effectively designed to accommodate *Pompeii*. So more than live with art, art was a central part of the Firkins' lives.

The interior of that Fishing Point house looked like a gallery. On the walls were some extraordinary paintings by major Australian artists, such as Shay Docking and John Coburn, Margaret Olley and Ray Crooke. And there were paintings and sculptures by local artists, whose work has helped shape how we see ourselves and our home region, such as Christine Ross, Graham Gilchrist, and Irvine Homer.

In the Firkin household, Shirley did most of the choosing and buying of works.

'Mum was the driving force behind it,' recalls Paul Firkin. 'She asked Dad's opinion, she asked my opinion, and in the end she just ignored us and bought what she wanted.'

Many of the works were bought from the matriarch of art in Newcastle, Anne von Bertouch, at her iconic gallery in Cooks Hill, with Caleb and Shirley attending many exhibition openings there.

'I could tell when a painting spoke to her,' Caleb told me of Shirley's buying method.

'She was fairly talkative, like me, so when she stopped in front of a painting and said nothing,

Sir William Dobell, Shirley Firkin and Gil Docking at the opening of the exhibition *Irvine Homer Retrospective: Paintings from 1958 to 1965*, von Bertouch Galleries, 1965  
The Shirley Firkin Bequest, 2019  
Cultural Collections, Lake Macquarie  
Photographer Ron Robinson  
Reproduced with permission of the *Newcastle Herald*



I knew I was in trouble. I knew it was going to cost me something.'

But the rewards were far greater than the cost. While Caleb connected with many of the works they bought, what was more important to him was that the art connected him with people.

He and Shirley came to know, and became friends with, many of the artists whose work they bought. As a result, whenever Caleb looked at the paintings on his walls, he talked about the artist. Every picture told a story for Caleb.

The Gleghorn paintings, and the Firkins had a

**Thomas Gleghorn**

born 1925 Thornley, England  
lives Adelaide, SA

*(figures)* c. 1965  
mixed media  
36.0 x 33.0 x 22.0cm  
The Shirley Firkin Bequest, 2019  
Cultural Collections,  
Lake Macquarie  
© Thomas Gleghorn

**Overleaf:**

*Pompeii* 1965  
mixed media on canvas  
152.0 x 335.0cm  
The Shirley Firkin Bequest, 2019  
Cultural Collections,  
Lake Macquarie  
© Thomas Gleghorn



dozen in their collection, prompted anecdotes that charted a dear friendship with Tom and wife Elsie stretching back to the 1960s.

'We hit it off straight away,' Caleb recalled, adding, 'We're both silly buggers.'

When he stood before a Coburn painting, Caleb didn't talk about the image but the character of the person who had created it.

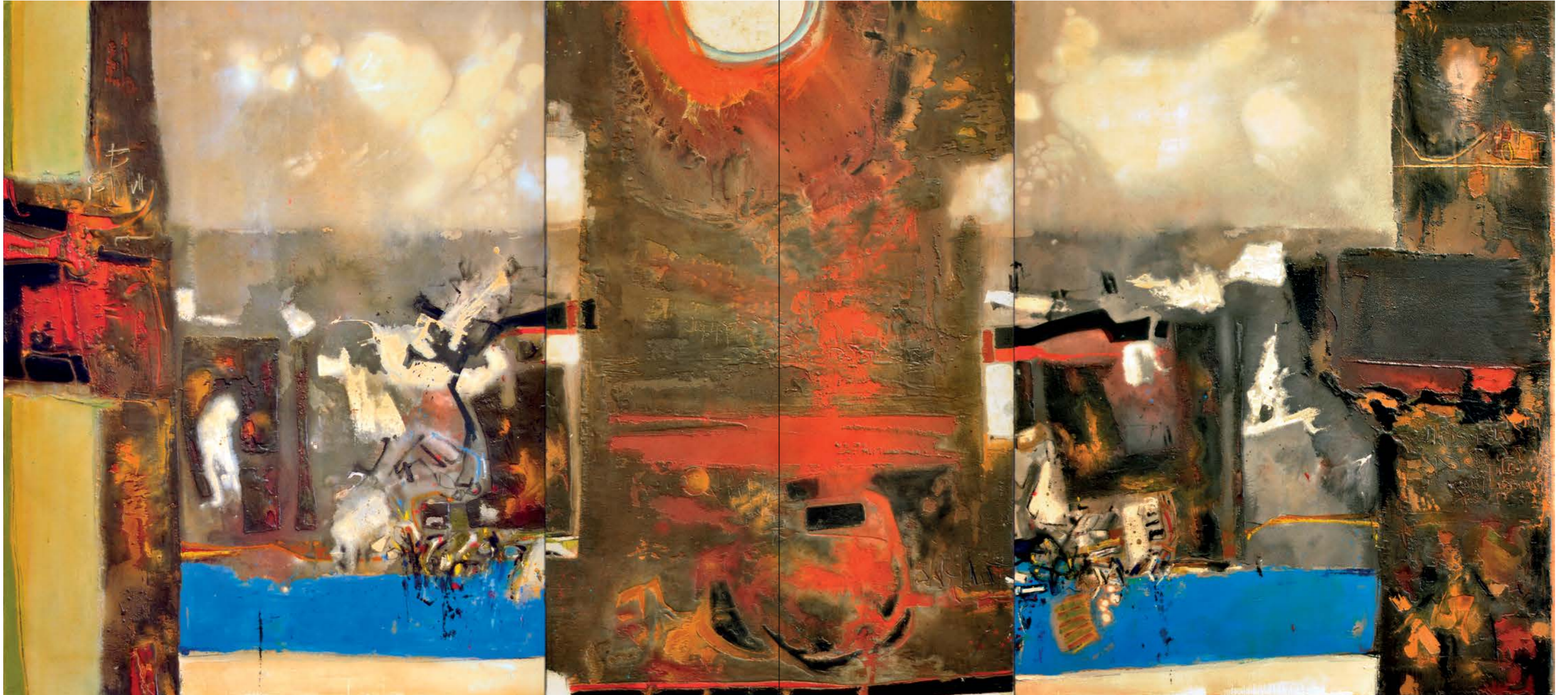
'John was such a lovely man,' Caleb said. 'He was so modest and unassuming, and I think he was one of the most beautiful guys I'd met.'

One of Caleb's favourite paintings in the collection was a work by Irvine Homer. 'Irv' lived just up the road at Buttaba Hills. As well as being a patron of Homer's work, Caleb had helped him medically. Homer had picked up a paint brush because he could no longer hold a shovel. A debilitating illness had ended his job as a manual worker, so Irvine Homer became an artist, depicting in a naïve but compelling style the hard-scrabbled bush life he had led for many years. Caleb and Shirley had bought a pile of Homer images. They filled an entire wall in the Firkins' home. But the Homer painting Caleb treasured the most was *The New Tractor*, which Irv had given him to say 'thank you'. What Caleb cherished more than the painting itself was the note that 'Irv' had written to accompany it.

'I know I could sell this painting,' the note read. 'But money fills the pocket and leaves the heart empty.'

Caleb Firkin's heart was full and open. For he was not only a sensual man, but an extraordinarily generous one. Caleb loved sharing what brought him joy. In Caleb's eyes, his and Shirley's art collection wasn't just for them. He would welcome friends – and once you had met Caleb, you were a friend – into his home for long lunches. He would open bottles of his fine wine, recite poems, plant the seeds of industrial deafness by playing Sibelius at Led Zeppelin volumes, and guide you around the art, telling his stories. The paintings and sculptures led to love and friendship. They were stunning works unto themselves, but they were made more beautiful by the generosity of Caleb Firkin.

In the lounge room, on a grand piano, which rested just under *Pompeii*, was a photo of Caleb's golden-haired goddess with the first director of Newcastle's public art gallery, Gil Docking, and the man whose work had helped Caleb fall in love with art, William Dobell. The trio had been photographed at an exhibition of Irvine Homer's works at von Bertouch Galleries in 1965. The notoriously reserved Dobell had agreed to be photographed, as long as the woman in the lily-patterned dress was in the shot. That dress



was being worn by Shirley, who hated being photographed as much as Dobell did.

'You want to be photographed with this dress?,' Shirley said to Dobell. 'I'll take it off, and you can be photographed with it!'

The photo was taken, with Shirley still wearing the dress.

'He was so relaxed, so easy to talk to,' said Caleb of Dobell. 'Not at all sort of upmarket or anything of that nature, no pretensions whatsoever.'

That image on the piano also illustrates the bonding quality of the lake, how that body of water can create and unite communities.

In the late 1940s, William Dobell had moved from Sydney to Wangi Wangi to escape the furore surrounding his portrait of friend and fellow artist Joshua Smith, which had won the 1943 Archibald Prize. Dobell wanted to escape the celebrity that had been foisted on him. He wanted to escape the pressure his art had created. In a way, he wanted to escape himself. He was physically and emotionally wrung out, with little desire to paint anymore. The very thing that had brought him so much pleasure and acclaim was now causing him intolerable pain.

Yet in that little village on the western shores of Lake Macquarie, William Dobell found himself. He found the will to paint again. He regained his

health. And he found somewhere he could call home. William Dobell became, to borrow the title of one of his most famous paintings, a Wangi boy.

Just as the Wangi community had helped him, Dobell helped others in the area. He supported and encouraged Irvine Homer, which was why Dobell was at the exhibition opening when he was photographed with Shirley. Bill had also offered help and unofficial tutelage to a young painter who had ridden his bike around the lake from Warners Bay to meet the artist, after he had seen Dobell's Wynne Prize-winning landscape, *Storm Approaching Wangi*, in the late 1940s. That artist was Tom Gleghorn.

The lake, like art, connects people.

Dobell may have largely left behind the Sydney art scene, but that world was still very much interested in the painter and his work, so many would travel north to Wangi to see him. One of the regular visitors was art dealer and renowned *bon vivant* Rudy Komon.

More than sell Dobell paintings, Komon and his wife Ruth were friends of Bill. And, given his knowledge and love of wine, it is easy to imagine Rudy arriving with a bottle or two to share with his mate while looking at the lake.

The Komons' friendship with William Dobell has a beautiful presence in Lake Macquarie's

#### Graham Gilchrist

born 1941 Gympie, NSW  
died 2007 Newcastle, NSW

*Body Cairne 111* n.d.  
marble  
15.0 x 35.0 x 25.0cm  
The Shirley Firkin Bequest, 2019  
Cultural Collections,  
Lake Macquarie  
Photographer Dean Beletich  
Reproduced courtesy  
of the artist's estate



Overleaf:

**David Boyd**

born 1924 Murrumbidgee, VIC  
died 2011 Sydney, NSW

*The Wanderer King Thrown*

[detail] 1970

oil on board

55.0 x 79.0cm

The Shirley Firkin Bequest, 2019

Cultural Collections,

Lake Macquarie

© David Boyd/

Copyright Agency 2019

collection, with the bequest from the estate of Ruth Spenser Komon. The six Dobell works tell a lot about the man who created them. They reflect Dobell's complexity.

He was a working-class Newcastle boy who abhorred snobs, and yet he would become Sir William Dobell, he was commissioned to paint portraits of leaders, including Prime Minister Robert Menzies, and he rubbed shoulders with royalty.

Two of the works in the collection, the studies for *Beach Carnival* and *Country Race Meeting*, provided the groundwork for paintings of the same names that are in the private collection of Prince Philip, Duke of Edinburgh. Dobell had known the husband of Queen Elizabeth II since the Second World War, when, as a Royal Navy officer, the future prince was in Sydney. They stayed in touch through the years, and when the royal couple visited Australia, Dobell was invited to functions and dinners.

Another work indicates how the famous and the influential were prepared to go out of their way to be portrayed by Dobell. The painting of Anthony Quayle as Falstaff is a dynamic portrait of an esteemed British actor. And it was created in Wangi. Anthony Quayle would become well-known for his roles in films such as *Lawrence of Arabia* and *The Guns of Navarone*. In 1953, he was touring Australia in a production of Shakespeare's

*Henry IV, Part One*. Dobell had agreed to paint Quayle's portrait, as long as the actor travelled to Wangi. And he did, with Quayle and his wife Dorothy Hyson, a fellow actor, staying at the Lake View Guesthouse, overlooking Wangi Bay.

Yet perhaps the most extraordinary Dobell work in the collection from the Komon bequest is the self-portrait, painted just before he died in 1970. Dobell was arguably Australia's greatest portraitist. In his hands, a brush was a scalpel, which he would use to cut through the flesh until he reached the soul of a sitter. While he was brilliant at exposing the true self of others, Dobell was distinctly uncomfortable at looking into a mirror. Dobell hated being examined or scrutinised. It was a big reason why he ended up in Wangi. So for William Dobell, a self-portrait was usually an exercise in deflection. However, in this ethereal work, there is an expression of almost contentment on the artist's face. You look at him, he looks back at you. It is as close to the artist as you're going to get from a Dobell self-portrait. And if, after peering at it for a while, you feel like you don't know William Dobell any better, that is probably the way he meant it to be.

Every Dobell painting in the Komon bequest exists in one way or another because of Wangi Wangi. This was where he started painting again. This was where he recovered. So these works are

testament to how the lake can inspire art and help heal a person. Which is why we are so fortunate to have these works in Lake Macquarie's collection.

Just as the city is fortunate to have been given the bulk of Caleb and Shirley Firkin's collection. In a way, history determined where the Firkins' art would end up. Paul recalls he was talking with his father about the future of the family's collection, as he wondered, 'What am I going to do with 150 art works? The best thing would be to donate the bulk of it.' Then, when Awaba House served as the city's art gallery during the 1990s, Paul remembers his father declaring, 'Right, this is where it should go!'

Awaba House, as we knew it, is gone. But the art that Caleb believed should find a home in the city's gallery lives on.

The Firkin bequest was always about far more than honouring the past. Above all, it was about Caleb celebrating his love for his golden-haired goddess, who died in 1996. That is why this bequest is known as the Shirley Firkin Bequest.

So just as they did in life, the Firkins continue to share with us all. Their art is now our art.

Hippocrates was right. Life is short, and the art long. And radiating from the art are qualities that flow from one generation to the next, affirming the

joy of life itself: generosity and friendship, beauty and love. ▲

**Scott Bevan, 2019**

Scott Bevan is a writer and broadcaster. He is the author of five books, including *Bill: The Life of William Dobell* and *Battle Lines: Australian Artists at War*. For Scott, Caleb Firkin was a dear friend, a mentor, and a tutor in the music of Sibelius and the drinking of Hunter wine.





**David Boyd**

born 1924 Murrumbidgee, VIC  
died 2011 Sydney, NSW

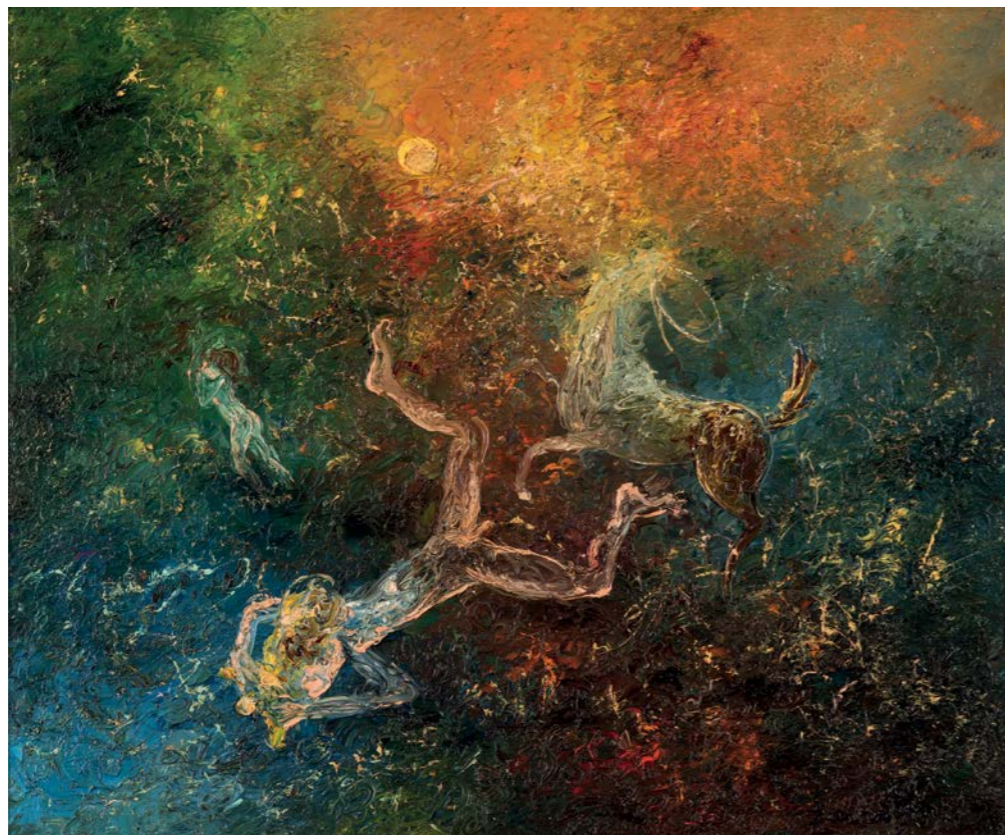
*The Wanderer King Thrown*  
[detail previous page] 1970  
oil on board

55.0 x 79.0cm

The Shirley Firkin Bequest, 2019  
Cultural Collections,  
Lake Macquarie

Photographer Dean Beletich  
© David Boyd/

Copyright Agency 2019

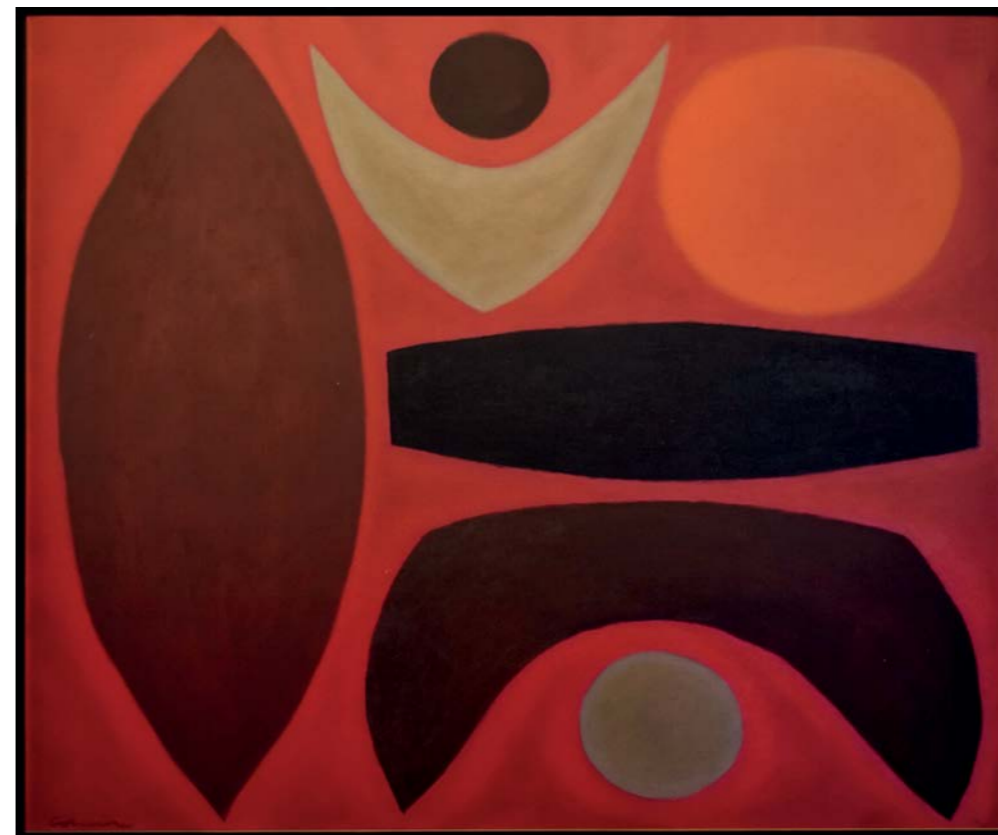
**John Coburn**

born 1925 Ingham, Qld  
died 2006 Sydney, NSW

*Legend III* 1967  
75.5 x 90.0cm

The Shirley Firkin Bequest, 2019  
Cultural Collections,  
Lake Macquarie

© John Coburn/  
Copyright Agency 2019



**Mike Kitching**

born 1940 Hull, England  
died 2019 Sydney, NSW

*Stratagem (Anatomy of  
War No. 3)* 1965

metal, enamel paint,  
steel, timber

97.0 x 93.0 x 13.0cm

The Shirley Firkin Bequest, 2019

Cultural Collections,

Lake Macquarie

Photographer Dean Beletich

Reproduced courtesy

of the artist's estate

**Sir William Dobell**

born 1899 Newcastle, NSW  
died 1970 Lake Macquarie, NSW

*Falstaff - Anthony Quayle* c.1951

oil on board

35.5 x 27.6cm

Bequest from the Estate of

Ruth Spenser Komon, 2002

Cultural Collections,

Lake Macquarie

Reproduced courtesy of the

Sir William Dobell Foundation





**Sir William Dobell**

born 1899 Newcastle, NSW  
died 1970 Lake Macquarie, NSW

*Sketch for beach carnival  
[Bondi Beach] c.1960*  
oil on board  
14.2 x 16.8cm

Bequest from the Estate of  
Ruth Spenser Komon, 2002  
Cultural Collections,  
Lake Macquarie  
Reproduced courtesy of the  
Sir William Dobell Foundation

**Bequest from the  
Estate of Ruth Spenser  
Komon comprises  
seven works by  
Sir William Dobell**

**The Shirley Firkin  
Bequest comprises  
works by the  
following artists:**

Norma Allen  
Doug Archibald  
Hatton & Lucy Beck  
Joan Beck  
Robert & Margot Beck  
Charles Blackman  
Les Blakebrough  
Arthur Boyd  
David Boyd  
Guy Boyd  
Lenore Boyd  
Kevin Brereton  
Judy Cassab  
John Coburn  
Noel Counihan  
Robert Emerson Curtis  
Ray Crooke  
Robert Dickerson  
Desmond Digby  
William Dobell  
Shay Docking  
Donald Friend  
John Gilbert  
Graham Gilchrist  
James Gleeson

Tom Gleghorn  
Robert Grieve  
Glen Henderson  
Frank Hinder  
Harold Hughan  
Irvine Homer  
Louis James  
Alun Leach Jones  
Mike Kitching  
Peter Laverty  
George Feather  
Lawrence  
Margo Lewers  
Norman Lindsay  
Keith Looby  
Francis Lymburner  
Elwyn Lynn  
Marilyn McGrath  
Margaret Olley  
Bob Parr  
William Peascod  
Lloyd Rees  
Christine Ross  
Susan Ryman  
Joshua Smith  
Luis Vivas  
Stephen Walker  
Brett Whiteley  
John Winch



**be. (your collection) be remembered**  
 curated by Damian Smith in consultation with Rob Cleworth  
 Museum of Art and Culture ▲ yapang, Lake Macquarie  
 23 November 2019 – 9 February 2020

This exhibition is one of the three projects:

*us. universal stories*

*we. wiyelliko*

*be. (your collection) be remembered*

curated to launch

Museum of Art and Culture ▲ yapang, Lake Macquarie

Publisher: Museum of Art and Culture ▲ yapang, Lake Macquarie  
 Director: Debbie Abraham  
 Editor: Meryl Ryan  
 Proofreader: Jenny Scepanovic  
 Designer: Stephen Goddard  
 Printer: Peachy Print Australia

© 2019 Museum of Art and Culture ▲ yapang, Lake Macquarie  
 & all contributors. No part of this publication may be copied,  
 stored in a retrieval system, transmitted or reproduced in any  
 form or by any means without the prior written permission of  
 the publisher and copyright holders. All enquiries should be  
 addressed to the publisher.

**Environmental Statement**

Sovereign Silk (text paper) is made FSC certified and manufactured  
 with elemental chlorine free pulps. Colorplan (cover paper) is an  
 environmentally responsible paper manufactured under strict  
 environmental management systems using Elemental Chlorine  
 Free pulp, which is FSC Mixed Sources.

**Museum of Art and Culture ▲ yapang, Lake Macquarie**

First Street Booragul NSW 2284

Box 1906 Hunter Region Mail Centre NSW 2310

T: +61 (0)2 4921 0382

E: [mac@lakemac.nsw.gov.au](mailto:mac@lakemac.nsw.gov.au)

W: [mac.lakemac.com.au](http://mac.lakemac.com.au)

I: @themacmuseum

F: @themacmuseum

ISBN-13: 978-0-6487156-2-7



Proudly funded by the NSW Government  
 through the Regional Cultural Fund in association  
 with Lake Macquarie City Council.



Print production supported by: peachy

MΔC  
Museum of Art and Culture  
Lake Macquarie ▲ yapang