

Remembering the Ewing and George Paton Galleries

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The exhibition *Creativity and correspondence: The George Paton Gallery Archive 1971–1990* was held from 11 to 27 September 2013 at the George Paton Gallery in the Student Union Building at the University of Melbourne. The exhibition, curated by Charmaine Ching, Alice Mathieu, Jeremy McEachern and Georgina Ward, celebrated the completion of the cataloguing of the George Paton Gallery Archive, which is held in the University of Melbourne Archives. The George Paton Gallery Archive is home to a variety of collections that are relevant to the development of the Ewing and George Paton Galleries between 1970 and 1990. The exhibition presented the relationships between artists and gallery directors, and work behind the scenes, by showcasing original archival materials such as correspondence, photographs, slides, newspaper articles, exhibition catalogues, early video art and posters.

In the past, the Ewing and George Paton Galleries promoted experimental art, attracting the work of local, interstate and overseas artists. The galleries also played a major role in the development of the Australian visual arts sector by providing their space to support emerging local artists.¹ This allowed young artists to launch projects that



would encourage them to develop their talent and creativity further.

The history of the Ewing and George Paton Galleries began in 1938, when the Ewing Gallery was established in the Student Union Building in order to display the collection of 59 Australian artworks donated to the university that year by Dr Samuel Arthur Ewing.² It was later renovated and in 1975 merged with the neighbouring George Paton Room, being renamed the George Paton Gallery.³ This expansion doubled the gallery's space, enabling larger exhibitions.⁴ Kiffy

Rubbo, director of the Ewing and George Paton Galleries from 1971 to 1980,⁵ dedicated her life to the arts by supporting diverse projects and exhibitions. During her time at the Ewing and George Paton Galleries she was known for her strong vision, which enabled her to identify many practical opportunities for the galleries. Furthermore, her skill in bringing people together and finding ways to involve them in the arts sector was well known. As such, she was often described as a passionate and respectful director.⁶ Under Rubbo's management, the

Opposite: View of the exhibition *Creativity and correspondence: The George Paton Gallery Archive 1971–1990*, held at the George Paton Gallery from 11 to 27 September 2013. Photograph by Sandra Bridie.

Below: *A room of one's own*, exhibition poster, 1974. Unit 65, ref. no. 1990.0144.0359, George Paton Gallery Collection 1972–1990, University of Melbourne Archives.

galleries became a channel connecting emerging artists with the visual arts world, as well as a social hub where interstate and international artists would convene. Following Rubbo's resignation and sudden death in 1980, the George Paton Gallery appointed three different directors over a 10-year span: Judy Annear from 1980 to 1982, Denise Robinson from 1982 to 1986 and Juliana Engberg from 1986 to 1990.⁷

The Visual Arts Board of the Australian Council for the Arts played an important role in supporting the development of the Ewing and George Paton Galleries in the 1970s and 1980s. The galleries applied for grants offered by the Visual Arts Board in order to realise their projects. These helped fund the galleries' exhibition programs and related activities each year. As a condition of receiving funding from the Visual Arts Board, the galleries were required to submit an annual report stating how the money was used.⁸ As a result, the Ewing and George Paton Galleries have a detailed record of their exhibitions and programs dating back to 1974. According to grant applications and annual reports dating from that year until 1989, the funds received from the Visual Arts Board were close to the amount requested.⁹ Interestingly, this amount also



Dr Janine Burke (left) and Kiffy Rubbo (right) posing with Ann Newmarch's *Suburban reflections* in the exhibition *A room of one's own*, 1974. Photograph by *The Age*. BWP/549, ref. no. 1990.0144, George Paton Gallery Collection 1972–1990, University of Melbourne Archives. Fairfax Syndication.



increased slightly each year,¹⁰ which could be due to the increase in number and size of the exhibitions, as well as the number of public programs held each year.

In 1975 the Visual Arts Board granted the George Paton Gallery \$4,850 for its exhibitions and programs. In addition, the Board offered an extra \$1,000 to develop Janine Burke's touring exhibition *Australian women artists: One hundred years, 1840–1940*.¹¹ Burke is an acclaimed art historian and curator, as well as being a prolific writer of works of fiction and non-fiction. She is also well known for her contribution to the development of Australian feminist art. As a fine-arts student in her honours year at the University of Melbourne in 1974, Burke co-curated the exhibition *A room of one's own* with Rubbo and Lynne Cook.¹² In 1975 she began her professional life by working at the Ewing and George Paton Galleries as curator of the exhibition *Australian women artists: One hundred years, 1840–1940*, with the assistance of the director, Rubbo, and the assistant director, Meredith Rogers.¹³ This exhibition acted as a stepping-stone to Burke's long and successful career.

The creation of *Australian women artists* was inspired by the exhibition *A room of one's own*, which was

presented at the Ewing Gallery from 8 April to 3 May 1974. In the early 1970s, the category of ‘women artists’ was barely acknowledged, although art critics and art historians had begun to debate the role of women in art since the publication of Linda Nochlin’s essay ‘Why have there been no great women artists?’ in *ArtNews* in 1971. At that time, Burke and Cook were young art historians who were keen to comment on the role of women in art by developing a feminist art exhibition. However, academics were not receptive to this way of thinking as they considered feminism as sociology rather than art history, and were unwilling to let them initiate the project. Undeterred, Burke and Cook brought the idea to Rubbo, who was open to the concept and supported them in developing the exhibition.¹⁴ The title of the exhibition was also selected by Rubbo, based on the title of Virginia Woolf’s 1928 essay addressing the notion of a feminine space in which creativity can take place.¹⁵

Thus, the exhibition was born from a vision of giving Australian women artists a platform on which to exhibit their works. The exhibition ultimately avoided presenting a feminist slant: it reflected the views of artists who happened to be women rather than of women being artists.¹⁶

Rubbo, Burke and Cook visited the studios of women artists in order to select works for the exhibition.¹⁷ They eventually decided to present the works of Lesley Dumbrell, Julie Irving and Ann Newmarch. These three contemporary women artists were selected because each had a different style and their works were already well known. Burke expressed in an interview her feelings about the development of *A room of one’s own*:

It’s very interesting for me because it was the first exhibition I’ve really been involved with working on and I had the opportunity to work with a dynamic and generous person like Kiffy and engage in the process of curatorial practice ... which was very exciting.¹⁸

To promote the exhibition, Burke and Cook wrote a special ‘women and art’ section in the university’s student magazine *Farrago*, which included an interview with artist Mirka Mora. However, it was in a public lecture that Rubbo and Burke became aware of International Women’s Year in 1975. This inspired the development of *Australian women artists: One hundred years, 1840–1940*, a historical art exhibition that re-evaluated works by earlier women artists.



Burke was appointed as research officer for *Australian women artists* and led the development of the exhibition. While her position title was not officially ‘curator’, which at that time implied a permanent position, she had the same responsibilities and duties as a curator today. She started developing the exhibition in early 1975 and brought it to the public in less than a year. It opened at the Ewing and George Paton Galleries on 2 September 1975 and later travelled to the Art Gallery of New South Wales, Newcastle City Art Gallery and Art Gallery of South Australia.¹⁹ While Burke

was developing the exhibition, she spent a significant amount of time in libraries, such as the State Library of Victoria and the Baillieu Library, going through publications documenting the artists in whom she was interested. As part of the development process she also travelled interstate to see works by women artists in the major galleries. 'I worked on the basis of selecting works I thought were good and deserved to be shown—rather than getting myself a certain number to be collected', she explained to Rosemary Williams, a journalist with *The Herald*, when describing how she had selected artworks for the exhibition.²⁰ Burke enjoyed this challenging selection process, with 71 artworks by 39 Australian women artists being presented in the exhibition.

The exhibition celebrated the contribution of Australian women artists from 1840 to 1940. Burke focused on this particular period due to her belief that she could present a comprehensive overview of the styles of women artists during those 100 years.²¹ Furthermore, this period coincided with significant changes in women's social status in Australia, with women gaining more power in the community. For instance, they were victorious during

that period in their struggles to earn the right to vote in different states.²² Women won the power to be more independent and, as a result, they started to pursue their own interests. This led to a trend of women beginning to study art at the National Gallery School, which would later become the Victorian College of the Arts. The 100 years chosen by Burke for the exhibition also include the period between the two world wars, during which many wonderful artworks were produced by famous women such as Grace Cossington Smith and Margaret Preston, in whom Burke was particularly interested. Burke's exhibition significantly influenced her own society and local women by helping to facilitate the women's art movement in Melbourne.

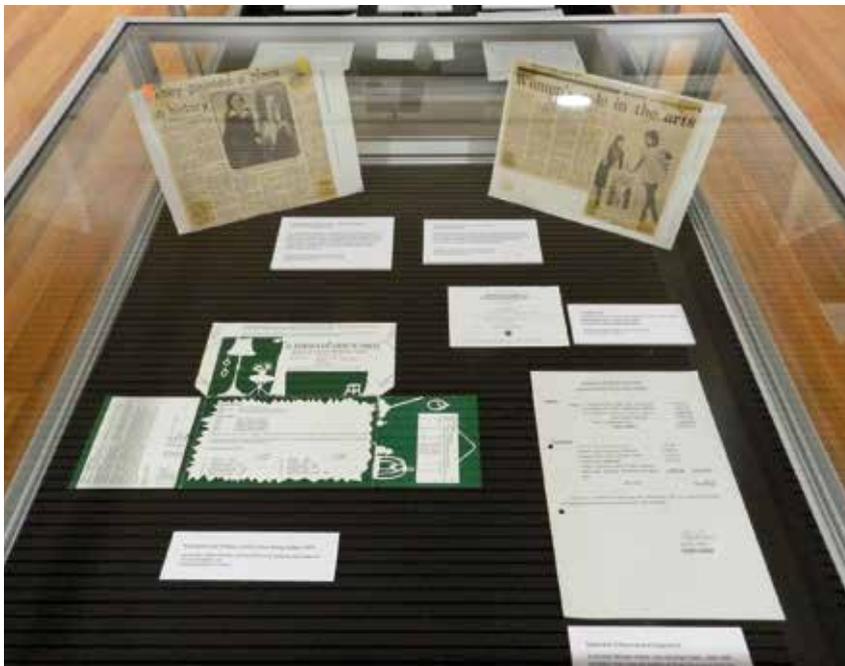
Curating *Australian women artists* was challenging, especially because of the limited time available for its execution. When Burke was overseas conducting research for the exhibition, she regularly exchanged letters with Rubbo and Rogers to report on her progress. Rubbo and Rogers would often send Burke the documents she needed and helped her with administrative tasks back in Melbourne.²³ Burke was responsible for making decisions for the exhibition, such as selecting

the venues and artworks. Rubbo had only suggested the Ewing and George Paton Galleries to Burke as one of the venues because she believed that this touring exhibition would put the galleries on the map as not only a contemporary and experimental art space (for which it already had a strong reputation), but also as a space for historical art. Hosting a major historical art exhibition of the calibre of *Australian women artists* would greatly affect the future of the Ewing and George Paton Galleries.

The opening of *Australian women artists* was a huge success and attracted lots of publicity, which gradually turned the Ewing and George Paton Galleries into a high-profile arts space. Burke explained how curating *Australian women artists* was a different experience from co-curating *A room of one's own*:

It was my first mature experience as a curator and as a historian. It was exciting to be doing fresh research ... I felt that Australian Art needed the focus. As Australia, we tend to look so much towards Europe or America and we had to be able to focus on what has been produced here. To find all

One of the cabinets in the exhibition *Creativity and correspondence: The George Paton Gallery Archive, 1971–1990*. Exhibits include newspaper articles 'Women's role in the arts' by Anne Latreille (*The Age*, 9 April 1974) and 'They painted a place in history' by Rosemary Williams (*The Herald*, 2 September 1975); promotional card for *A room of one's own*; and an invitation card and financial statement for *Australian women artists: One hundred years, 1840–1940*. Unit 5, 65–66, ref. no. 1990.0144, George Paton Gallery Collection 1972–1990, University of Melbourne Archives. Photograph by Sandra Bridie.



these women artists of such high calibre, who had produced such an interesting body of work was to me a wonderful thing to do.²⁴

Burke had worked with Rubbo on many projects at the Ewing and George Paton Galleries and they shared a close friendship. In our interview Burke described Rubbo as a very supportive mentor and friend. Rubbo had given her the opportunity to be involved in the gallery and be part of the contemporary gallery

scene by appointing her as research officer for *Australian women artists*. This was Burke's first job after graduating and she greatly appreciated the trust that Rubbo had placed in her. Rubbo was also the one who strongly encouraged Burke to turn the catalogue into a book after the completion of the exhibition, as she realised the importance of the project to the art world. The book was published in 1980 and became a bestseller.²⁵ Burke reflected:

I certainly owe Kiffy as she kept pushing me about that [turning the catalogue into a book] ... I feel incredibly grateful that I knew her and she had such a powerful effect on my own life. My professional life was shaped by Kiffy.

Burke also considered Rubbo a very important figure to the Australian art world as she was a highly regarded curator and gallery director. 'She was charismatic and had great energy and stamina ... She was always keen to engage with new forms of art and artists', Burke recalled. She also remarked that Rubbo had a skill for identifying talented young artists quickly. She was a firm believer that giving them opportunities to be involved in the art world would develop their skills. Her involvement in establishing the Ewing and George Paton Galleries, as well as her mentorship of young artists, had earned her the respect of many great people in the arts sector.

At the very start of her career Burke proved herself to be a successful curator and influential person in the women's art movement, through the development of two key exhibitions: *A room of one's own* and *Australian women artists*. She has long been an inspiration to many individuals. The exhibition

Creativity and correspondence revealed the close friendship between Burke and Rubbo during the process of developing the two exhibitions. As a curatorial assistant for *Creativity and correspondence*, I endeavoured to capture the legacy of Burke and two of her exhibitions held in the 1970s. The process of gathering information for the exhibition shed significant light on the roles of the Visual Arts Board and the Ewing and George Paton Galleries, as well as on Burke's early career. Furthermore, by going through the archival materials and interviewing Burke I learnt what an important figure Kiffy Rubbo had been in Burke's life, due to their sharing of many experiences at the Ewing and George Paton Galleries. Thus I aimed to illustrate this history of Burke and her relationship with many influential individuals in her life. Ultimately, our exhibition showcased many archival items from the George Paton Gallery, which I hope captured the effort and significance of Burke's time developing these projects.

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The collections of **University of Melbourne Archives** are available for use by all genuine researchers; see www.lib.unimelb.edu.au/collections/archives/.

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- 5 Vivian, *When you think about art*, pp. 62–123.
- 6 Mary Eagle, 'In debt to Kiffy Rubbo', *The Age*, 10 November 1980, p. 10.
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- 16 Correspondence, *Australian women artists: A room of one's own*, 1974–1978. Unit 26 (restricted access), ref. no. 1990.0144.0135, George Paton Gallery Collection 1972–1990, UMA.
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- 19 George Paton Gallery, *Annual report to Visual Arts Board 1975*, version 1.
- 20 Rosemary Williams, 'They painted a place in history', *The Herald*, 2 September 1975, in George Paton Gallery, *Annual report to Visual Arts Board 1975*, version 1, p. 66.
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- 24 Burke, Interview with Charmaine Chi Yan Ching.
- 25 Janine Burke, *Australian women artists, 1840–1940*, Melbourne: Greenhouse Publications, 1980.