

A centrifugal perspective

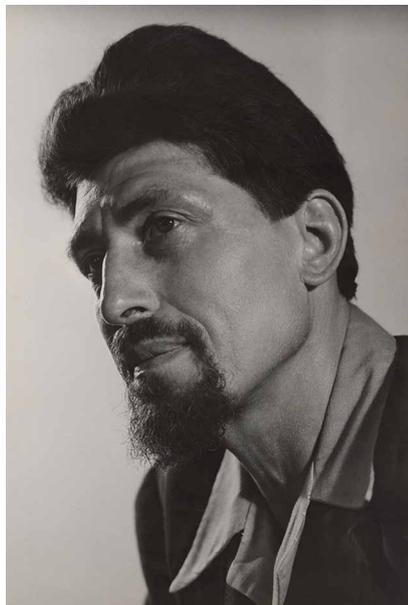
Unfolding Weaver Hawkins' *Another day*

Katja Wagner

Weaver Hawkins' painting *Another day* (opposite) is centrifugal, its darting geometries pushing beyond the picture plane.¹ The work frames a snapshot of a wider machine of monotonous human existence hurtling into infinity. Hats, hands, newspapers; hats, hands, newspapers; hats, hands, newspapers. Like an earlier Hawkins oil painting, *Morning underground* (1922, see page 57), set among the bustle of Londoners commuting on the Tube, this work depicts a morning train transporting an army of automatons to their offices as they try to block out the prospect of another day with wads of newspaper text.

The viewer of *Another day* looks down from an oblique angle on a cluster of anonymous hats scattered across the canvas. Poised wing-like between them are white and grey broadsheet newspapers, their print indistinguishable. Among these are glimpses of stylised hands and pairs of half-moon eyes, the latter a flick of brown underlined in black, floating alien-like under the hats on faceless surfaces. Crowding the compressed train compartment, these forms similarly populate the picture plane. Figures of commuters are outlined and then fringed in an electrostatic line of black, brown, white or bottle-green: a hallucinogenic halo.

Harold Frederick Weaver Hawkins (below) was born in August 1893 in a prosperous suburb of South London, the eldest of five brothers. Despite the painfully dysfunctional family environment in which he was raised, the progressive Victorian liberalism that his parents embodied had a profound effect on him.² Hawkins' assurance in the social benefits of order is deeply pertinent to his artistic practice; he not only took a spatially structured and holistic approach to process and composition, but created works of art with a tendency towards inquiry and experimentation.³



This aspect of Hawkins' method reflects the influence of his architect father, and he later commented that 'Architectonic or Classical art is greater than the artist, who is only a link between the spectators and a universal order in nature'.⁴ Hawkins' 1958 oil *In Lisbon* reveals his obsession with geometry in the fenestration of clustered apartment façades, which interlock their angular perimeters in dynamic tension.⁵ Moreover, Hawkins' study for *Another day* illuminates the linear harmony of his work in its visible grid, as well as his meticulous preparation.⁶ Further evidence of his parents' intellectual ideals can be traced in the lectures, art criticism and art-society activism he pursued in Australia.⁷

As an adolescent, Hawkins attended Alleyn's School, where his artistic proficiency was nurtured with additional classes and critical support. His unwavering 'inclination to draw and paint' (as he later described it) was cemented.⁸ In 1910 Hawkins enrolled at the Camberwell School of Arts and Crafts, as his volatile family environment (his mother suffered a succession of breakdowns) was not conducive to studying for the University of Oxford entrance examinations. Nevertheless, at Camberwell his skills and interests

Opposite: Margaret Michaelis, *Weaver Hawkins, artist*, c. 1947, gelatine silver photograph, 50.0 × 40.0 cm. 86.1384.302, gift of the estate of Margaret Michaelis-Sachs 1986, National Gallery of Australia.

Below: Weaver Hawkins, *Another day*, 1954, oil on composition board, 71.0 × 91.0 cm (sight). 1954.0008, purchased 1954, University of Melbourne Art Collection. © Reproduced courtesy of the estate of the artist.



developed while he entered the cosmopolitan London art scene, and he was now exposed to modern art from Europe.⁹ Indeed, elements of Vorticism (a movement combining Cubism, Expressionism and Futurism in explosive angular and abstracted compositions) can be traced in the tessellated assemblage of stylised body parts choreographed in *Another day*.¹⁰

Nonetheless, as with many others of his generation, Hawkins' early success was halted upon enlisting in the war effort in 1914. His regiment was promptly sent to France, preventing him from sitting his final examination for the Board of Education, which would have qualified him to teach.¹¹ Instead, Hawkins was plunged deep into trench warfare, mutilated by enemy fire at the Battle of the Somme, and left for dead. The two days he spent dragging himself back to the Allied trenches were accompanied by an 'unearthly wail', as he scrambled over corpses, nearly suffocated in disease-infested mud and fainted repeatedly from agony.¹² He was one of the 200 (or one-fifth) of his regiment who survived.

Hawkins went on to spend two-and-a-half years in French and English hospitals, enduring 20 operations, during which time his father managed to prevent the amputation of both his arms. Instead,

his shoulders, wrists and many of his fingers were permanently stiffened, his elbows 'cut ... right out'.¹³ Before discharge in 1919, Hawkins began to re-teach himself to paint and draw, surgery having restored partial mobility to his left hand.¹⁴

Hawkins' experience of trench warfare fully awakened his enduring pacifist convictions. But his injuries diminished his standing in the eyes of critics and reduced public support. For much of his life Hawkins abandoned signing his art with his monogram 'HWH', replacing it with 'Raokin' (an Italian's misinterpretation of 'Hawkins'), to distance himself from what others called the 'crippled artist'.¹⁵ However, more important to him was the moral activism that his experiences incited and that he expressed through his art. For Hawkins, his achievements as an artist with debilitating war injuries were subordinate to his determination to supplant ignorance, war-mongering and irrationality with critical reflection, humanity and peace. *The innocents* (1968) depicts a twisted wasteland of massacred bodies, a window onto the sheer quantity of human atrocities committed during the 20th century.¹⁶ It pleads for a true reassessment of military aggression, urging the return of order to untangle the chaos of

contemporary history. Like *Another day*, this linocut uncovers reality to bring the viewer's conscience into sharp focus. Similarly, the *Puppet rehearsal* (1943) testifies to Hawkins' lifelong belief in individual agency,¹⁷ while in *Man* (1950),¹⁸ he positions rationality as the only force capable of extricating humankind from the pandemonium engulfing it.¹⁹ Thus *Another day* fits into a larger oeuvre of moral works fuelled by Hawkins' personal experience and pain.

Hawkins' marriage to Irene Villiers in 1923 ended 'the most terrible years of my life' after hospitalisation in France.²⁰ It also began more than a decade of travel, observation and stylistic development, during which the couple lived in south-east France (where Roleena was born in 1924 and Laric in 1930), central Italy, Sicily, England, Barcelona, Malta (where Nigel was born in 1928), Tahiti and New Zealand.²¹ Hawkins explored local life in sketches and paintings such as *The wine press, St Tropez* (1926).²² Visible in that painting is Hawkins' vivid colour palette, the canvas alight with iridescent blue, green and sun-kissed crimson, sorbet-pink blending into hot white. The colours reflect the heat of the day and the strain of workers operating the wine press. Cool shadows stretch across white-plastered walls. Such

Weaver Hawkins, *Morning underground*, 1922,
oil on canvas, 76.0 × 100.0 cm.
90.1976, purchased 1976, Art Gallery
of New South Wales. © Reproduced
courtesy of the estate of the artist.



vibrancy of pigment choice appears throughout Hawkins' oeuvre. Contrastingly, the sombre palette of *Another day* recalls the smokiness of *Morning underground*. Another Mediterranean work, *Des figuiers* (1924),²³ also sheds light on *Another day*, with its 'arabesque' or 'serpentine' liling trees evoking the sweeping movement of newspaper pages, and also the work of English Rococo artist William Hogarth, after whom Hawkins was nick-named at school.²⁴ With a firm paradigm and a new setting, Hawkins' visual language shaped itself around streamlined form and symbolic colour.

Arriving in Australia in 1935, Hawkins' enjoyment of the climate and the companionable Australian disposition was coupled with less jubilant discoveries: an oppressively conservative socio-political atmosphere and the identity discrimination he had known in England. Newspapers divulged his experience of the Somme, and it wasn't until 1939 that modern European art—such as that seen by Hawkins while studying at Camberwell—was exhibited in Australia. A decade passed before Hawkins was persuaded to hold his first solo exhibition, and as late as 1954 he felt compelled to sign his study for *Another day* with 'Raokin'.

Amid this, Hawkins and his family retreated to a property at Mona Vale, north of Sydney, where they lived a simple but contented family-centric lifestyle, as evident in works such as *Nigel studying* (1946)²⁵ or *Flower packing shed* (1947).²⁶ Hawkins did not need to search out the modernism other Australians voyaged overseas to discover, concentrating instead on producing works voicing his keen observations and humanitarian messages.²⁷ It was a lifestyle with stark differences from the whirring capitalist apparatus depicted in *Another day*. Moreover, dependent for income on his English World War I disability pension, Hawkins had to be flexible with media and materials, particularly during the Depression and wartime shortages. He sometimes reverted to painting on composition board (the support for *Another day*), or using watercolour rather than oil.²⁸ Such temporally diverse Australian works as *Modelling* (1943),²⁹ *Going round* (1954)³⁰ and *In the wilderness* (1972)³¹ show that, during his independent period in Australia, Hawkins began to experiment with the coloured contours articulated in *Another day*. This visual effect he had originally observed many years earlier, in Van Gogh's *L'Herbage aux papillons* (1890) at the Tate Gallery

in London, amazed by the way Van Gogh's butterflies projected out of the picture plane from their recessive contours. However, instead of black, Hawkins used complementary hues as 'a symbol of advance' he had noticed when 'working from nature'.³² Far from being discouraged by physical distance from European modernism, Hawkins crystallised his forms and ideas.

Being inwardly directed, and independent of trends in the Sydney art world (despite his heavy involvement in art societies and an awareness of the work of his contemporaries), Hawkins' art received disapproving reviews. He was considered too intellectual, 'not a painter in love with paint but a thinker in pursuit of an idea', his forms stiff, 'the art of a meccano set, certainly not the art of painting'.³³ To such criticism he responded: 'it is a romantic, low-tone type of glaze painting which is the vogue and the fashion at the moment here. So, my "intellectual" direct impasto, high-tone paintings have little chance of selling but they may have a little cultural influence—I hope!'³⁴ Bernard Smith's review of Hawkins' entry to the 1954 Sulman Prize was an exception to the norm, arguing that Hawkins' work had never been fashionable because:

his paintings contain ideas, and he works out his compositions in a firm linear style after the manner of the *quattrocento*. Most contemporary artists and critics in Australia find thinking a painful experience, which they prefer separated from the sensuous enjoyment of colour and shape. Further, Hawkins' linear style virtually contradicts the 'messiness equals sensitivity' notions unconsciously championed for donkey's years now by the *Herald* art critic. As a result Hawkins is one of the most neglected painters in Australia today.³⁵

Hawkins' studied compositions and powerful clarity of thought, colour and line were seen by the neoclassicists and expressionists of the time as simplistic and conceited didacticism. He was everything they were not, and therefore incomprehensible to them. When the University of Melbourne purchased *Another day* in 1954, none of Hawkins' works was found in state collections, aside from two works purchased concurrently by the Art Gallery of New South Wales.³⁶

By the 1970s, however, things had begun to change. Daniel Thomas's tribute exhibition at the Art Gallery

of New South Wales received rapturous reviews, with Nancy Borlase of *The Sydney Morning Herald* praising it as 'one of the strongest shows to date'.³⁷ Nevertheless, it was too late to be of consequence to the artist. Between 1972 and 1974 Hawkins suffered an onslaught of strokes, painting and drawing with great difficulty as the little movement he had in his arms and hands was nearly extinguished. In 1974 he was hospitalised, dying in August 1977. The retrospective that Ron Radford had been organising at the Ballarat Fine Art Gallery, which was intended to raise Hawkins' public profile with a new perspective and never-before exhibited works, became the artist's memorial exhibition.³⁸

In his foreword to the catalogue of the *Weaver Hawkins memorial retrospective exhibition*, Radford lamented that 'It is sad to think that an artist who painted constantly and consistently well for more than half a century, should be so neglected', adding 'Weaver Hawkins was one of the finest and most original mid-century painters working in Sydney where he painted and exhibited for forty years'.³⁹ Indeed, it is true that until the 1970s it was as though the public and critics had been blind to the poignant messages taking visual and verbal form on his canvases,

boards and pages. One cannot help but feel frustration, when exploring Hawkins' highly developed works like *Another day*, that the creator of such visual and communicative dynamism was never publicly celebrated, his efforts left unacknowledged in his lifetime. Yet, one must not forget the material legacy of Harold Weaver Hawkins, in which the 1954 oil painting *Another day* plays a part. Hawkins commented in 1965:

... more and more people are realising ... that art which had been so neglected is really a very very important side of civilisation and that without it we are just developing into sort of automatons ... never developing anything for ourselves so that the mind will become a sort of mechanical thing, whereas art even if you never do anything great at it, if you take an interest and do a little ... you're keeping the spark of creativity alive in you, and you'll find it will benefit you personally, and ... the whole country.⁴⁰

Katja Wagner is an undergraduate student of art history and architecture at the University of Melbourne. Through her involvement with the Ian Potter Museum of Art's Talking Art Library, she began exploring the life and works of Harold Weaver Hawkins, intrigued by *Another day* in the University of Melbourne Art Collection.

The University of Melbourne Art Collection is managed by the Ian Potter Museum of Art on the Parkville campus. For opening hours and other information, see www.art-museum.unimelb.edu.au.

- 1 Chris Wallace-Crabbe, 'Weaver Hawkins', in *Visions past and present: Celebrating 40 years*, Ian Potter Museum of Art, University of Melbourne, 2012, p. 87.
- 2 Eileen Chanin and Steven Miller, *The art and life of Weaver Hawkins*, Sydney: Craftsman House, 1995, p. 14.
- 3 Chanin and Miller, *The art and life of Weaver Hawkins*, pp. 20–1.
- 4 Weaver Hawkins, personal notebook, quoted by Daniel Thomas in his introduction to Ballarat Fine Art Gallery, *Weaver Hawkins: 1893–1977*, Melbourne: Ruskin Press, 1977, p. 4.
- 5 Weaver Hawkins, *In Lisbon*, 1958, oil on canvas, 49.5 × 36.5 cm. 70.1974, purchased 1974, Art Gallery of New South Wales.
- 6 Weaver Hawkins, *Composition study for 'Another day'*, 1954, 35.5 × 45.9 cm. 253.1976, gift of the artist's family 1976, Art Gallery of New South Wales.
- 7 Chanin and Miller, *The art and life of Weaver Hawkins*, pp. 42, 67; Ballarat Fine Art Gallery, *Weaver Hawkins*, p. 6. Australian art societies in which Hawkins was involved included the Australian Watercolour Society, the Society of Artists, the Contemporary Group, and the Contemporary Art Society, of which he served both as vice-president (1948–51, 1953) and president (1952, 1954–63). Hawkins was active in these groups' publications, community programs and frequent exhibitions.
- 8 Weaver Hawkins, cited in Chanin and Miller, *The art and life of Weaver Hawkins*, pp. 14–18.
- 9 Chanin and Miller, *The art and life of Weaver Hawkins*, pp. 20–4.
- 10 'Vorticism', in Ian Chilvers and Harold Osborne (eds), *The Oxford dictionary of art. New edition*, Oxford University Press, 1997, p. 589; Chanin and Miller, *The art and life of Weaver Hawkins*, p. 62; Wallace-Crabbe, 'Weaver Hawkins'.
- 11 Chanin and Miller, *The art and life of Weaver Hawkins*, pp. 26–9; 'Weaver Hawkins 1893–1977, interviewed by Hazel de Berg, Sydney, 1965', in Geoffrey Dutton (ed.), *Artists' portraits*, Canberra: National Library of Australia, 1992, pp. 62–9 (64).
- 12 Chanin and Miller, *The art and life of Weaver Hawkins*, pp. 33–4.
- 13 'Weaver Hawkins 1893–1977, interviewed by Hazel de Berg', pp. 64–6; Chanin and Miller, *The art and life of Weaver Hawkins*, p. 66.
- 14 'Weaver Hawkins 1893–1977, interviewed by Hazel de Berg', p. 66; Chanin and Miller, *The art and life of Weaver Hawkins*, p. 36.
- 15 Chanin and Miller, *The art and life of Weaver Hawkins*, pp. 38–40, 50.
- 16 Weaver Hawkins, *The innocents*, 1968, linocut, 38 × 48 cm. 294.1976, gift of the artist's family 1976, Art Gallery of New South Wales.
- 17 Weaver Hawkins, *Puppet rehearsal*, 1943, oil on hardboard, 61.0 × 78.5 cm. Private collection, Sydney.
- 18 Weaver Hawkins, *Man*, 1950, oil on canvas, 123 × 303 cm. UNSW P 1980/0031 (082165), gift of Professor Laric Hawkins for Mrs Rene Hawkins and the Hawkins family 1980, Collection of the University of New South Wales.
- 19 Chanin and Miller, *The art and life of Weaver Hawkins*, pp. 78–84.
- 20 Chanin and Miller, *The art and life of Weaver Hawkins*, pp. 42–5.
- 21 Chanin and Miller, *The art and life of Weaver Hawkins*, pp. 45–52.
- 22 Weaver Hawkins, *The wine press*, St Tropez, 1926, oil on canvas, 60 × 80 cm. Private collection, London.
- 23 Weaver Hawkins, *Des figuiers*, 1924, oil on canvas, 65 × 80 cm. Private collection, London.
- 24 Chanin and Miller, *The art and life of Weaver Hawkins*, p. 80.
- 25 Weaver Hawkins, *Nigel studying*, 1946, ink and wash on paper, 46 × 50 cm. Roakin Collection.
- 26 Weaver Hawkins, *Flower packing shed*, 1947, oil on board, 50 × 70 cm. Private collection, Melbourne.
- 27 Chanin and Miller, *The art and life of Weaver Hawkins*, pp. 56–7, 65.
- 28 Chanin and Miller, *The art and life of Weaver Hawkins*, pp. 38, 64.
- 29 Weaver Hawkins, *Modelling*, 1943, oil on board, 61 × 71 cm. Private collection, Melbourne.
- 30 Weaver Hawkins, *Going round*, 1954, oil on hardboard, 78.5 × 60.0 cm. 9035, purchased 1954, Art Gallery of New South Wales.
- 31 Weaver Hawkins, *In the wilderness*, 1972, oil on hardboard, 121.0 × 90.5 cm. Collection of Mr and Mrs Kennewell, Sydney.
- 32 Chanin and Miller, *The art and life of Weaver Hawkins*, pp. 66–7.
- 33 Ballarat Fine Art Gallery, *Weaver Hawkins*, p. 4.
- 34 Weaver Hawkins, quoted in Chanin and Miller, *The art and life of Weaver Hawkins*, p. 70.
- 35 Bernard Smith, 'Archibald, Wynne and Sulman Awards for 1953', *Meanjin*, vol. 13, no. 1, Autumn 1954, pp. 106–8 (108).
- 36 Chanin and Miller, *The art and life of Weaver Hawkins*, p. 71.
- 37 Nancy Borlase, 'Spotlight on Weaver Hawkins', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 4 June 1958, quoted in Chanin and Miller, *The art and life of Weaver Hawkins*, p. 72.
- 38 Ballarat Fine Art Gallery, *Weaver Hawkins*, p. 1.
- 39 Ron Radford, in Ballarat Fine Art Gallery, *Weaver Hawkins*, p. 1.
- 40 'Weaver Hawkins 1893–1977, interviewed by Hazel de Berg', p. 69.