

Up from the Vaults April Connections: Vivienne Shark LeWitt, John Brack and William Strutt

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Hi everyone,

My name is Raafat Ishak, I am a Melbourne based artist and head of Painting at the School of Art, Victorian College of the Arts. It's Monday 6 April 2020 and my guess is that a lot of us are in a similar situation today, working and in my case, recording from home.

I am honoured to have been asked to talk about a selection of works from the Ian Potter Museum collection [the University of Melbourne Art Collection], a collection which I am very familiar with having had very close contact with it since the mid 1990s as an artist, an academic and not that long ago as a museum employee.

A few years after I graduated from art school, I joined the art conservation team working at The Potter as a technical assistant to art conservators. Now, this was around 1996 or 7 and it was such a privilege to have a paid part time job within the visual arts industry, to learn more about artists' materials and techniques behind the scenes but most importantly, it was an incredible opportunity to work very closely with a very unique art collection whether in the conservation labs, in the store rooms or during install.

My time there as a conservation technician was like a second education. Not only was I so closely involved in the material analysis and treatment of art objects and a very useful and very practical engagement with artists materials and techniques, but I was also able to look very closely at the history of Australian art and gain a better understanding of the relationship between colonial history, artists and institutions.

It was also an opportunity to consider Indigenous history and its own unique relationship to institutions but more importantly to contemporary museum practices and more broadly to contemporary art. I guess this was an area of knowledge that neither my Australian high school education nor my art school education focussed on.

The Potter collection is rich in ancient, premodern, colonial, modern and contemporary art and artefacts. And by the time I was there in the late 1990s, all the political and social threads and implications of the collection were about to come into play in a newly designed museum building, the current Nonda Katsalidis building, which we now know as The Potter. The conservation labs were located in the old physics building which is embedded on the south side of the current building.

The launch of the new Potter was a particularly exciting time for the university, for conservation, for the collection and for the public. Frances Lindsay, the museum's

director at the time curated the first exhibition of the collection, installing historical and contemporary works side by side. It is from this incredibly significant install that I draw my first work from the collection to discuss, Vivienne Shark Lewitt's painting titled *Bloody hell*, created in 1994.

But I will come back to that in a minute. I would like to briefly mention another influential exhibition that also happened in 1998, *Viewing the Invisible* was an installation by the American artist and museum interventionist Fred Wilson, it represented the culmination of a three-month residency at The Potter and incorporated collection material from The University of Melbourne Medical History Museum, The Anatomy Museum, and the Art Collection. Works were also sourced from the collections of three key regional Victorian galleries – Ballarat, Bendigo and Geelong and from the archival holdings of the State Library of New South Wales.

Viewing the Invisible comprised two discrete spaces: a 'colonial' room housing nineteenth century Australian landscape paintings, and an adjacent glass enclosure and sealed door. In the former space, Wilson used infra red analysis as a metaphor for the 'peeling back' of the pictorial surface to reveal prior histories of Indigenous land occupation and dispossession following European colonisation. In the second area, he created a fictitious 'greeting gallery' containing everyday and ceremonial objects of diverse cultural significance. In this space visitors to the museum could interact with objects of specific meaning to their cultural background.

A third space, visible through two semi-reflective windows at each end of the colonial room, added a further layer to the installation. Housing male portrait busts from the university campus, in addition to scientific instruments and medical apparatus, it made historical reference to the University of Melbourne as a site of academic scholarship underscored by patriarchal ideals.

In this sense it reflected more broadly upon the traditional role of the university, as well as the museum, as significant in the formation of dominant ideological positions. A sound recording of men in muffled conversation, their conversation audible amongst themselves only, accompanied the display. The placement of two portrait busts after Benjamin Law, depicting Tasmanian Aboriginals Truganini and Woureddy, in front of the windows made pointed comment upon their exclusion from the conversation behind them, while simultaneously giving positional primacy to them within the gallery space.

I guess it's about here that my selection of the Shark Lewitt painting, *Bloody hell*, starts to make sense, but also my other two selections, William Strutt's painting *Bushrangers* from 1887 and John Brack's *Burning of the Books* from 1958.

Vivienne Shark Lewitt came into prominence in the early 1980s, exhibiting small allegorical paintings that became iconic of their time, and I guess, iconic of my time as a high school migrant student looking for something other than what was then considered institutional, fashionable and in turn conservative. I was lucky enough to be briefly taught by Vivienne in the late 80s while undertaking a folio preparation TAFE course to apply for art school.

I have been interested in and fascinated by her work ever since. Something about the power of indifference, the muteness of the image, the almost anti image quality that becomes psychological and takes one outside of the image itself to consider place and context. There is an articulation of character that seems to be mute and passive yet defiant and psychologically loud. *Bloody hell* appeared in The Potter's opening collection install in 1998 surrounded by Australian colonial paintings. Was the title of the painting, *Bloody hell*, which appears comical, laconic in an Australian sense, was it in fact literal and should we not take titles literally anyway? was Shark Lewitt's painting literally exhibited in the midst of a bloody hell? The hell that colonialism and its representation in art we have inherited, the male centric history of Australia and history of art.

But here is a female artist, a cosmopolitan artist, a modern figure in modern urban clothing, pondering the very same milieu which she finds herself in, the milieu of the museum, the institution and the bloodied history of Australian art. I think on display here, is that very point of the power of indifference and its residue in the form of protest and the implications of counter violence.

The female head in the painting is as one with the materiality of its substrate, the canvas, confidently gazing out at the viewer while holding what appears to be a male head in her arms, in an unmistakably baby hold. Meanwhile, the head's gaze is split between the state of sleep, or perhaps amnesia and consciousness. One eye is shut while the other is staring back at the female head in an expression of futility. Is the man's head a response to a type of neo liberal guilt, where one side is psychologically defiant, or even blind to a history of its own making while the other is awake, knowing, yet infantile and incapable of responding to the urgency of reconciling contemporary society with its history.

In positioning this painting amongst the historical works in the collection, it appears quiet and restrained, yet, serious in its caring call for action, there is an underlying but economical and modest protest, it is asking to be heard and considered.

This leads to me the second work in the collection which I have chosen to discuss. Vivienne Shark Lewitt's work, I think, follows that very cool, reserved and subtle tradition of Melbourne painting pioneered by John Brack in the second half of the 20th century. John Brack is another artist that had a huge influence on my own work well before my art school days. When I was a high school student, I bought a framed poster of a John Brack nude in the early 80s, not knowing much about art or John Brack.

In the early 2000s, I had this incredible opportunity, which came through my work in art conservation, to assist Helen Maudsley in sorting out John Brack's studio not long after his death. This was a particularly important moment for me, not only did I come so close to one of my favourite and most influential artists' studio, his working methods, his brushes, paints and palette, but I also had this incredible privilege to be introduced to the work of his lifelong partner, Helen Maudsley, who in turn became as influential on my own work, but also, brought forward this very point that the Shark Lewitt painting discussed earlier revealed to me.

Here was a particularly important mid to late 20th century woman artist who was mostly, if not entirely overshadowed by her male counterpart. Helen Maudsley's art and life call for an entirely different discussion.

Back to The Potter collection, I do not exactly recall the year or the moment, but sometime, perhaps in the early 2000s, I was looking through the painting racks in The Potter storage room and came across what seemed to me an unmistakably John Brack painting. A painting I had never seen before and I was confident I knew every Brack painting that was ever made. It was rough, unfinished, very un Brack-like in its formatting, in its diptych division, in its rough painterly surface. Still, it retained John Brack characteristics in the handling of the figures. Most astonishingly though, it was the subject that caught my attention. On one side, a woman is seated at a table, totally focussed on writing while on the other, a group of men are totally focussed on burning books. The painting it turns out, to the best of my knowledge, to be a proposition for a painting. I do not know the full details, but it seems that John Brack entered this painting in a prize, or rather, a prize that was a proposition for a commission which he did not win. Somehow it remained in the holdings of the university collection, again I am not sure why or how. It has never been displayed, or even properly photographed, hence the lack of an image here. It did however shed a light on something that was always subtle and covert in Brack's work, his discomfort with the conventions of both art and society, his empathy for the inequities or the imbalance of the creative impulse, I guess, an impulse that has been mostly measured by the actions, even the violent actions of a predominantly male reading of life and its events. This was a very special encounter, it was like seeing an important artist's unresolved and unrealised work, a rough sketch of an idea, and characteristically in a Brack-like fashion, a work that addresses difficult and unresolved social idioms. I think it is important to note here that this 1958 painting was created during a period that encompassed broad and disparate subject matters, horse racing, female nudes and portraits of artists friends.

I now want to turn to my final and oldest selection, William Strutt's painting titled, *Busrangers, Victoria, Australia, 1852*, painted in England in 1887, 35 years after the event it was depicting, an armed hold up on St Kilda road in 1852. It appears to me that there is a thread between this painting and the Shark Lewitt and Brack paintings discussed before, in that they are all figurative paintings, or paintings of figures in action. It was not a conscious decision to select figurative works, they are in fact three works that I believe had a profound effect on my understanding of Australian art and they all happen to be figurative. It was not the figuration, but the staging that I think caught my attention. The same thing occurred when for example I encountered Geoff Lowe's series of paintings, *Ten famous feelings of man* in the late 1980s, a colleague of Shark Lewitt and an artist who was also influenced by John Brack's work. I think what I find myself resorting to in Australian art is this very characteristic of staging, of creating a visual moment that relies on the act of make believe, showing what cannot be shown because in fact, it may never have happened, an intellectual exercise of making and looking, it props up again and again, in the works of the many Australian artists I believe have had a fundamental influence on how I make and look at art.

The Strutt painting doesn't exactly extol these same characteristics, but it is a staged painting nonetheless. It depicts a scene that occurred many years before its making. It was painted in England. It condemns a colony to events of gun violence, robbery and lawlessness. It has three perspectives in its painterly structure. It is a completely staged depiction, a studio painting disguised as a historical painting. The history it is conveying is almost comical, unworldly and foreign. And for a colonial painting, what is so evident is that it refutes the very specific history that is attributed to that very specific place, and time. What was being robbed in 1852 was not the trinkets and gold coins of the settlers travelling along St Kilda Rd, but the entire indigenous landholding that was being taken over by the new colony, and in typical colonial artistry, this very moot point was perhaps disguised as an armed hold up of innocent travellers.

It is very hard to know what Strutt intended with this painting, and in some ways, it seems fair to suggest that perhaps he was making an underhanded comment on the idea of colonial robbery. Who knows? It is one of the few works I am aware of in 19th century Australian art, that perhaps disguises its intent with the depiction of a mundane and dated scene or event. It was created in England for the English market and therefore it lacks that sense of responsibility local Australian artists would hold dear, to their settler public. The truth in it is disguised, but also, and I may be reading too much into it, deliberately misconstrued. What I see though is a beautifully constructed work of art, that I was compelled to use and restage in a 2017 photograph I was commissioned to create for the Hero building in Melbourne's CBD, another Nonda Katsalidis building. In the photograph, I replaced Strutt's characters with my own artists friends and colleagues. The location of the photograph was Royal Park, the opposite end to St Kilda Rd, and another contentious site of colonial land grabbing and demarcation of indigenous people.

And on that note, I would like to conclude by saying that what I find most compelling about The Potter collection is its setting as a university collection, a scholarly collection so to speak, a collection that allows artists and scholars to discuss art and culture in uncompromised ways.

Thank you