

THE FIELD

Landmark Australian exhibition

It was the year the first manned lunar mission saw Apollo 8 successfully orbit our nearest celestial neighbour, the moon, and Stanley Kubrick's 2001: *A Space Odyssey*, launched into cinemas across Australia. American civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr's dream of blacks and whites co-existing harmoniously as equals, ended the same year, when he was assassinated in Memphis and Presidential nominee Robert 'Bobby' Kennedy met the same fate, gunned down in Los Angeles. The Tet Offensive and Battle of Khe Sanh saw the conflict in Vietnam, now in its ninth year, escalate and opposition to the war reverberate around the world. Student riots in Paris almost brought down the French Presidency and the Soviet Union rolled tanks into Prague, thus ending a brief period of political liberalisation in Czechoslovakia. 1968 was a tumultuous year across the globe.

In Australia, 1968 heralded the end of a three-year drought and a buoyant economy saw an increase in the standard of living of many Australians. The local art scene was also in the ascendancy, with the acceptance of its established artists at an international level. *Recent Australian Painting*, held at London's Whitechapel Gallery in 1961, had announced the arrival of a modern antipodean voice to the shores of Old Blighty. In Sydney and Melbourne, new commercial galleries were opening, dedicated to 'avant-garde' tendencies in art. However, it was the grand opening of the National Gallery of Victoria's new quarters on St Kilda Road in August 1968, which signalled a fresh enterprise.

The inaugural exhibition – brainchild of NGV director Eric Westbrook, the curator of Australian art, Brian Finmore, and exhibitions officer John Stringer – was to be an entirely new venture for the museum. *The Field* would present to its audience the most recent trend in Australian contemporary art, the practice of one particular direction of abstract painting which was sweeping both Australia and the world, which the American art critic Clement Greenberg had coined "post-painterly abstraction". Various known as hard edge, colour field painting, geometric abstraction and minimalism, Greenberg proposed in *Art and Australia* in March 1996, that this new movement lifted colour rather than paint as the pinnacle element of expression and "significant carrier of meaning", thereby displacing the "emphasis on paint as material and handling as expression".



Dick Watkins *October 1967*. Diptych: synthetic polymer paint on canvas 244 x 305 x 4 cm stretcher overall. AGNSW collection, gift of Garry Pursell 2008. © Dick Watkins, licensed by Viscopy, Australia.

The Field featured 74 paintings, sculptures and conceptual works by 40 artists: the youngest participant, Robert Hunter, was only 21, the eldest, Michael Nicholson was 52, and 16 of the artists were under 30.

Reaction to the exhibition was mixed, with critical response falling largely in favour for what Patrick McCaughey referred to as not a new style but a "different convention, a different set of shared beliefs and presuppositions about the nature of the work of art and the role of the Australian artist" (*Art and Australia*, December 1968). This "new convention" aligned itself not with the accepted English/European – in particular 'School of Paris' – modernist tradition, but with Anglo-American artists working in New York, Los Angeles and Washington, as exemplified in the exhibition *Two decades of American painting*, which toured Australia in 1967.

This Australian Collection Focus Room display will explore, through six works in the Gallery's collection (all shown in Melbourne, and then in Sydney at the AGNSW), the antecedents to and impact of *The Field* exhibition upon artistic practice in Australia in a period which would threaten the 'death of painting' altogether.

NATALIE WILSON
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THE FIELD
Australian Collection Focus Room,
September 5 to November 29, free