

Field Notes

The Field Art Gallery of New South Wales > 5 September to 29 November
After the Field Peter Pinson Gallery > 5 September to 3 October

The Field, an exhibition of abstract Australian art which opened in August 1968 at the National Gallery of Victoria (NGV), was a major blip in the seismic chart of local art history. Even more than four decades later, *The Field* remains one of those earth shattering historical moments that anyone with even a passing interest in Australian art is meant to be familiar with. In fact, its impact was so massive that exhibitions continue to spring up in its wake at regular intervals like reverberating aftershocks.

If you've never heard of it, or if your recollections have become hazy, two such shows currently in Sydney act like a set of crib notes. The Art Gallery of New South Wales (AGNSW) focus room exhibition, *The Field*, is a chance to see six paintings from the 1968 show by James Doolin, Michael Johnson, Paul Patros, John Peart, Ron Robertson-Swann and Dick Watkins. *After the Field*, at Peter Pinson Gallery, provides a snapshot of what came next for eight of the original 40 artists: David Aspden, Sydney Ball, Col Jordan, Alun Leach-Jones, Alan Oldfield, John Peart, Emanuel Peart and Ron Robertson-Swann.

In its initial incarnation, *The Field* was co-curated by Brian Finemore and John Stringer as the first temporary exhibition held in the NGV's new building in St Kilda Road. It was conceived as a deliberate counterpoint to the museum's permanent collection. As they wrote in their introduction to the catalogue, "It is not impartial and comprehensive. It is biased to define one particular direction in contemporary Australian art." It was of its moment; a major survey of a hard edge abstraction and colour field painting (a movement which at the time was still very much in flux) and this is part of its significance.

Somewhat ironically, while *The Field*'s supporters Patrick McCaughey and Elywn Lynn both argue strenuously against the necessity of Australian art displaying any distinctive regional flavour (Lynn going so far as to declare in his catalogue essay that it is a "Philistine notion"), the exhibition nevertheless marked a distinctively Australian coming of age milestone. It was a manifestation of a new and burgeoning confidence that local artists could take on the world and hold their own; a triumph over those two indelible nemeses of

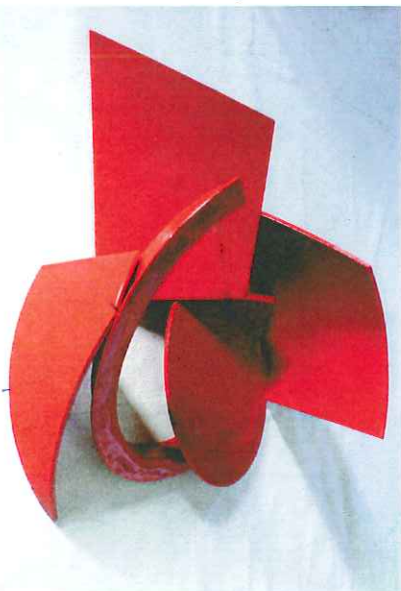
Australian art: the cultural cringe and the tyranny of distance. McCaughey wrote in 1984, in an essay which accompanied another aftershock exhibition, *The Field Now* at Heide Museum of Modern Art, that the artists from *The Field* felt at the time that "they and Australian art in general were on the threshold of a new start and a new adventure."

In terms of seeing how that adventure has played out, it's a little unfortunate that there isn't more cross over between the AGNSW show and *After the Field*. But Ron Robertson-Swann and John Peart do make two interesting and contrasting case studies.

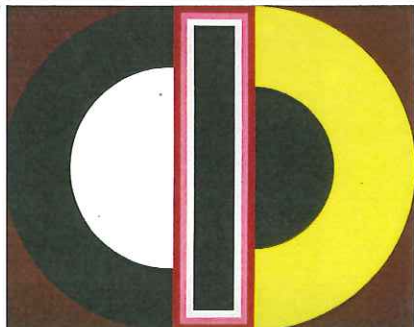
Although he was represented by hard edge painting in *The Field*, Robertson-Swann is best known as a sculptor. His often monumental work is sometimes compared to that of Anthony Caro, who he trained with at London's St Martin's School of Art. As an artist, practicing over nearly five decades, Robertson-Swann has remained committed to abstraction and a lean, cool, hard, modernist aesthetic.

John Peart's style, on the other hand, changed quite quickly after *The Field*. His painting, *Corner Square Diagonal* (1968), on show at the AGNSW, is a minimal, almost monochromatic composition of a white square merging into blue. As he explains in a 2004 interview with Sunnara Viravong, referring to his work from the late sixties, "I felt the need to clear the decks. Those paintings were to do with the elimination of anything not strictly essential." But Peart's exploration of minimalism and colour field painting was brief. While his paintings remain abstract to this day, his style rapidly became more expressive and brighter. As he explains, "When I began work again using colour it was a bit like relief from starvation ... or fasting." And his delight in using colour is still evident in his work.

Whether you love of leather hard edge or colour field abstraction, *The Field* remains an important moment in Australian art history; impressive amongst other things for its celebration of home grown contemporary art while it was still fresh and its willingness to back young talent. And, as *After the Field* demonstrates, despite no longer being hot young things, many of its artists are still passionately pursuing art more than 40 years later. That's impressive too.



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2.



3.

1. Ron Robertson Swann, sculpture in painted steel, *untitled*, 35 x 70 x 85cm, 1974-75.
2. James Doolin (United States of America, b.1932, d.2002), *Artificial landscape 68-1*, 1968, synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 168.7 x 132.4 x 6.8cm, Collection Art Gallery of NSW.
3. Dick Watkins (Australia, b.1937), *October 1967*, dipycht: synthetic polymer paint on canvas. Left panel 243.7 x 152.4 x 4cm stretcher; right panel 244 x 152.5 x 4cm stretcher overall. Collection Art Gallery of NSW.