



BRETT WHITELEY

# 9 SHADES OF WHITELEY

ART  
GALLERY  
NSW

**Education Kit**

[www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/education](http://www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/education)

Brett Whiteley Studio 2 December 2006 – 29 April 2007

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## EDUCATION KIT OUTLINE

This education kit highlights key works and themes from the exhibition *9 Shades of Whiteley*. The kit aims to provide a context for using the works and exhibition as a resource for K–6 and 7–12 education audiences. It may be used in conjunction with a visit to the exhibition or as pre-visit or post-visit resource material.

The kit has been written with reference to the NSW visual arts syllabus. It specifically targets teacher and student audiences but may also be of interest to a general audience.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Education kit coordination: Alec George, coordinator Brett Whiteley Studio

Essay: Barry Pearce, head curator of Australian art

Commentary: compiled from text by Barry Pearce and Alec George

K–6 Looking and making activities and 7–12 Framing questions: Danielle Gullotta,

coordinator K–6 programs; Leeanne Carr, coordinator secondary school and

Asian education programs; Victoria Collings, coordinator K–6 & family programs;

Tristan Sharp, senior coordinator education programs; and Alec George

Editor: Jennifer Blunden

Design: Karen Hancock

Additional content from original kit written by Jo Foster, Liz Gibson, Jennifer Keeler-Milne, Barbara Konkolowicz and Nike Sawas.

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Art Gallery Road, The Domain, Sydney 2000 Australia

pp@ag.nsw.gov.au

www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/education

www.brettwhiteley.org

Cover: *Far North Queensland – Port Douglas* 1992

oil, earth, charcoal, collage on plywood

183.5 x 198 cm board; 185 x 200 x 4 cm frame

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Brett Whiteley Studio

2 Raper Street, Surry Hills, Sydney Australia

www.brettwhiteley.org

## SECTION 1

BRETT WHITELEY

# 9 SHADES OF WHITELEY



Brett Whiteley Studio (upstairs)

I hardly ever see my paintings around. I don't have the faintest idea where half of my life's work is. Sometimes that worries me. We should have a museum specially built for retrospectives. It would be ten feet wide and a mile long, like a railway tunnel, and you could walk down someone's life chronologically ...

BRETT WHITELEY Interview with Rudi Krausmann 1975 in McGrath 1995, p 214

This has been my secret, strange and abnormally mystical ambition to sit alone ... to retire entirely from everything and everyone that is important – and allow my understanding (or maybe it's my misunderstanding) of how environment can mould, shape or even stain the personality of a genius.

BRETT WHITELEY in Pearce 1995, p 15

... art was as much an essential of life as life was an essential of art. It was a creed rich in opportunity for an artist devoted to the exploitation of the human figure, just as he was devoted to the exploitation of the human opportunity in life.

EDMUND CAPON, director Art Gallery of New South Wales, in Pearce 1995, p 7

# Introduction

One of Australia's most celebrated artists of the 20th century, Brett Whiteley was an intense and prolific practitioner who worked across an impressive spectrum of media. He was a draughtsman, printmaker, sculptor and writer, but ultimately flourished best at that which '... in his deepest conscience [he] most cared about: being a painter.'<sup>1</sup>

The exhibition *9 Shades of Whiteley*, held in Whiteley's last home and studio, is a chronological artistic journey. It is a mini-retrospective tracing Whiteley's life and career, from his earliest work in 1955, *Self portrait at sixteen*, to *Far North Queensland – Port Douglas*, painted in 1992, just a few months before his death. The exhibition includes nine phases of his art: early works, abstraction, bathroom series, Christie and London Zoo series, Lavender Bay, portraits, birds, landscapes and late works. This astonishing body of work displays all the dexterity, imagination and ambition of a prodigious talent.

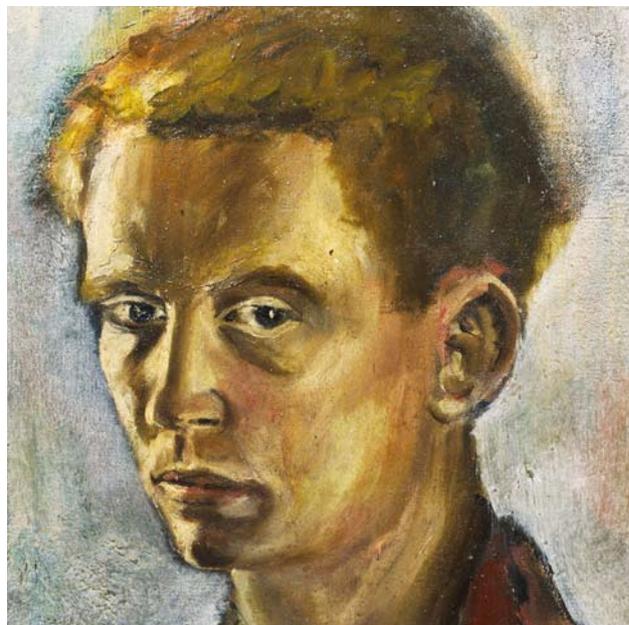
A foundational moment in this journey occurred while Whiteley was boarding at Scots College in Bathurst, New South Wales, when, one Sunday, he found a book on van Gogh at St Stephen's Presbyterian Church:

I picked the book up and studied it – it completely changed my way of seeing. The immediate effect was a heightening of reality in that everything I looked at took on an intensity ... That morning returning to school by bus, I remember the poplar trees were bare for winter ... but it took me years to paint what I saw. I remember having this very, very powerful sense that my destiny was to completely give myself to painting – that I would be a painter and it was a remarkable moment of knowing that.<sup>2</sup>

Whiteley won his first major prize at the age of 20, the Italian Travelling Art Scholarship, awarded by Sir Russell Drysdale. Three of the paintings that Whiteley submitted for the award are on display: *Sofala* 1958, *July painting* c1959 and *Dixon Street* 1959. The scholarship enabled Whiteley to travel to Europe and experience first-hand much of the art he had only seen in reproduction. His extended period overseas is represented with several works including *Woman in bath* 1964, *Chimpanzee* 1965, *Christie* 1965 and *Fiji* 1969.

Inspired by Matisse and his superb *The red studio* 1911, Whiteley produced *The balcony 2* 1975, in which he flattened the picture plane, saturated it with ultramarine blue and shifted the horizon line beyond the edge to allow the viewer to experience, with a kind of symphonic expansion, the natural beauty of Sydney Harbour, his home. The following year he painted *Self-portrait in the studio*, which went on to win the Archibald Prize.

Whiteley won the prestigious Archibald Prize for portraiture twice, the second two years later with his much-admired and confronting *Art, life and the other thing* 1978, which candidly examines the problem of drug addiction and the creative process. Both works are included here.



*Self portrait at sixteen* 1955, oil on board

Whiteley once said in an interview:

I hardly ever see my paintings around. I don't have the faintest idea where half of my life's work is. Sometimes that worries me. We should have a museum specially built for retrospectives. It would be ten feet wide and a mile long, like a railway tunnel, and you could walk down someone's life chronologically ...<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Pearce 1995, p 40

<sup>2</sup> From *Difficult pleasure* 2006

<sup>3</sup> Interview with Rudi Krausmann 1975 in McGrath 1995, p 214

# Brett Whiteley: 9 shades

Of all the Australian painters who emerged during the mid 20th century, when Australian art first began to exude a collective smell of uniqueness internationally, Brett Whiteley was the most mercurial, the most ambitious to make an impact on the world at large. On the eve of his departure from Sydney in early 1960 at the age of 21, he had gathered his research and ideas about being a painter – and was poised to explore not only the techniques but also the very nature of charisma in his artistic heroes. This he did with a relentless poetic passion, noting upon arrival in Montparnasse, Paris:

I am now in Modigliani's country. This has been my secret, strange and abnormally mystical ambition to sit alone ... to retire entirely from everything and everyone that is important – and allow my understanding (or maybe it's my misunderstanding) of how environment can mould, shape or even stain the personality of a genius.<sup>1</sup>

Whiteley had grown up in Longueville, a quiet suburb on the northern shores of Sydney Harbour during the 1940s and '50s, and it seems indeed that, at a very young age, Whiteley had become fascinated almost as much by the fame of art as by its making. For a time his father was involved in the reproduction of paintings, and William Dobell, a local art 'god', visited the house, demonstrating to the boy how to execute the dry-brush technique. Soon after, he discovered the work of another luminary, Lloyd Rees, who lived not too far from Longueville. Whiteley wrote to his mother from boarding school asking her to find him a second-hand easel, as well as books on the works of Augustus John and Jacob Epstein. His appetite became insatiable. He wanted to know how certain artists, be they William Dobell, Lloyd Rees, Vincent van Gogh or any number of others, had seen their subjects and turned them into the materials of drawing and painting. And, perhaps most eagerly, what it was that made those artists shine above the rest.

As his career developed, Whiteley's interest in the dynamics of fame was to repeatedly get him into trouble with critics. But the battle between hype and its antithetical reaction, as he planned his exhibitions with shrewd calculation of their public impact over some three decades, tended to obscure his real achievement. For underneath all the fuss of the publicity which surrounded him was a hard-working painter of tenacious dedication and sensitivity. In later years his drawings could become flashy and his paintings vulgar, but his work always reflected a fierce loyalty to the great traditions of drawing and painting which had come to his attention from the very outset of his career. From those traditions he snared what he needed: from Australia and Europe; and from the cultures of the East as well as the West.

Whiteley's contemporary Michael Johnson recalled the earnestness with which they both in the 1950s – then adolescent artists employed by the advertising agency Lintas – scoured the art classes and sketch clubs of Sydney: up and down George Street, from the Julian Ashton School in The Rocks to Central Station, over to the National Art School in Darlinghurst, and across the harbour to the Northwood group. They looked



Whiteley in Melbury Road studio, London 1962. Photo: Axel Poignant

for the harbour motifs of Rees and the street scenes of Sali Herman. They conjured up the palette and landscape forms of Russell Drysdale and of the gold-mining towns of Sofala and Hill End, and painted misfits in the charity soup kitchen as they might have been evoked by Dobell with Modigliani and Picasso hovering over his shoulder. Beckoned by the international art scene, they studied reproductions of modern and old masters in libraries and in Carl Plate's Notanda Gallery bookshop, where not just a few postcards disappeared into their pockets. They were learning the folklore as well as the skills of their future vocation.

After he arrived in Italy on a travelling scholarship in 1960, Whiteley harvested artistic inspiration from museums, galleries and churches. In London he produced a series of abstractions with which he strutted the world stage. One of the finest of these paintings was bought by the Tate Gallery, making Whiteley the youngest artist to enter the collection in the Tate's entire history. *Untitled red painting* 1961 glows with the colours of Australian earth and at the same time reflects Whiteley's early admiration for the British painter William Scott, whose abstract compositions derived from table-top still lifes, reinforced the younger Whiteley's passionate interest in shapes, edges and daring proportion on the picture plane. Adding erotic overtones from Arshile Gorky, Whiteley put into his youthful masterpiece most of the basic elements of his pictorial agenda to come. His command of them reached full pitch years later in paintings such as the Sydney Harbour-inspired *The balcony 2* 1975, where he was able to create at his best in landscapes on a large scale an extraordinary symphonic radiance.

Bedecked by a fear of stagnating, Whiteley moved from his early 1960s abstraction into a bathroom series, celebrating the sensuality of his wife Wendy's body, extolling the curve not as a product of reductive geometry, or even human movement, but quite simply as the coefficient of sexual desire. Sexual desire of course had its dark side, and Whiteley developed (stimulated not a little by a sense of competition with Francis Bacon) a series

based on the English necrophile murderer John Christie. These were macabre but strangely thrilling pictures, their dense indigo- purple backgrounds contrasted with the sumptuous flesh of violated female bodies. The swerve into something discordant with the mood of his most recent work became a conscious habit, a toying with opposites, and one which began at once to tantalise and disturb the art commentators of his day.

In 1965 Robert Hughes wrote in the *Bulletin*:

Every painting of Whiteley's is a roll in the hay with the muse of art history: as soon as an issue about the nature of art or perception was raised by another painter – Gorky, de Kooning, Bacon, Giacometti, Rauschenberg, Warhol, Piero della Francesca, Uccello, Masaccio – Whiteley was into it, either painting his way through it or arguing it out ... Like Arshile Gorky, with whose early years Whiteley's have much in common, his outstanding act as a painter is the decision not to be original – not to narrow his style into the crippling uniqueness of a trademark, but to keep it open, and to preserve the flow of ideas between his art environment and his own experience.<sup>2</sup>

At about this time Whiteley made a brief visit back to Australia. He had won prizes, been included in international surveys and was being talked about as one of the cream of young painters working both in England and in his country of birth. Inevitably, he wanted to try his hand in America, and on the strength of a Harkness Fellowship set sail from London to New York in 1967. He and Wendy, with daughter Arkie in tow, headed straight for the notorious Chelsea Hotel. Whiteley was now one of the Marlborough stable, and it seemed that his conquest of the international scene would be complete. Yet it was not quite to be.

The energy of New York intoxicated him. But he also felt its destructiveness, and his reading of the milieu was an infatuation that soon turned sour. America was then an agonised cauldron of change: old values were challenged by new; edifices of political power and ideology were undermined by protests and assassinations; alternative lifestyles were promoted by the writers and poets of the beat generation. The Vietnam War was at its worst and lines of battle were drawn between Americans themselves. Whiteley's first reaction to New York was to see it as a big piece of living sculpture, punctured by flashes of yellow, the colour of optimism and madness. But he soon began to fear America: its internecine violence and its potential to ruin the soul. Most of all, however, he hated its indifference to cultures outside its own boundaries. It was, to his amazement, provincial.

As he laboured to fit into a cultural pattern with which he felt uncomfortable, Whiteley's focus in New York showed signs of dissipation. Reviewers were good-natured about the apparent moral consistency of his political messages, written, printed or collaged with calculated irony, and admired especially his drawings of copulating couples. But unfortunately the tenuous combinations of material, including fibreglass, oil paint, photography, electric lights, steel, barbed wire and, in one instance, rice and a hand-grenade, consigned a good number of his works of this period to oblivion. His American interlude came to a spectacular end

with the creation of the vast multi-panelled *The American dream* 1969. This work, which his dealer refused to exhibit, proclaimed his anger and frustration, born partly of his futile ambition to change society which he saw descending into insanity, and partly of his domestic life. Drugs and alcohol may have offered the promise of perceptual enhancement – although he was still a few years from serious heroin usage – but already their influence shadowed his existence.

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of Whiteley's period in America was his development of persona, or more aptly, heroic alter-ego paintings, which he continued after his return to Australia at the end of 1969 following a brief but calamitous stay in Fiji. In New York he had constructed a composition on the theme of van Gogh, depicting a floating head, copied from a self-portrait of the Dutch painter, connected by a serpentine blood track to an open razor. Zoom lines linked the head to Arles landscape drawing, and a collaged, double-headed arrow pointed to the words 'life' and 'art' in symmetric opposition. Sometimes this strategy of symbolic homage worked, and sometimes it was prosaic: an obvious illustrative device which could border on cliché. But he was determined to push on with the genre.

Hence Whiteley returned to Australia carrying a baggage of interests in cultural personae from Europe and America – Charles Baudelaire, Arthur Rimbaud, Paul Gauguin, Brendan Behan, Bob Dylan – around which he constructed hugely ambitious drawings and paintings. It may be that these works are ultimately most fascinating for the questions they raise about Whiteley's regard of himself. Why did he need to declare such a pronounced interest in these luminaries of art, literature and popular music? Envy? Did he feel some sense of self-dissatisfaction deep within? Some of his hero portraits he destroyed to give birth to far more engaging creations. For example, one based on the Japanese revolutionary writer Yukio Mishima was turned into *Alchemy* 1972–73, another vast, multi-panelled painting like *The American dream* which explored nothing less than the artist's entire psychic and biological life to the moment transmuted into art. References to other artists abound in these homages, but it must be said in his favour that Whiteley never denied his influences. As artist Lee Krasner said of him earlier: 'When he sees a painter he admires, he meets his work head on, and paints through the middle of it'.<sup>3</sup> In attempting to project the charisma of a host of famous personalities, most of whom he considered shared his addictive nature, he was in fact constructing and exploring his own alter-ego through much the same process.

The last two decades of Whiteley's career in Australia until his sad, isolated death in a motel room on the south coast of New South Wales in 1992 begs a summary free of the hype and controversy which pursued him. It is not an easy task. The simplest way might be to edit Whiteley to his classic paintings of landscapes and figures: his seductive arabesque from early abstraction; his bathroom and Christie pictures; the landscapes of Fiji with their exuberant vegetation and brilliant birds; the perfume-soaked colours of his Lavender Bay paintings of

nudes and Sydney Harbour; his birds and landscapes drawn and painted around the countryside of New South Wales and Queensland; and finally his drawings of Paris, made in 1989 three years before his death. In pure landscape genre particularly, Whiteley reached the most intense level of ecstasy it seemed conceivable, and even then yearned to go beyond. Just before Paris, he wrote with a sense that he had never quite reached far enough:

I am determined to crush a coloured picture from that area within me that is game and wild and intoxicated – I want a garden that is a smear of Cambodian lipstick, green and mauves and lettuce green and magenta purple and ultramarine and arctic pale blue with yellow and orange and cadmium yellow against apple green and baby pink apricots ... Can I do it?<sup>4</sup>

But this would be incomplete. For Whiteley aimed to put pain and discordancy into his work too. He made constructions which broke as much as embraced the aesthetic of Matisse, whose *The red studio* 1911, not to mention Gauguin's *The yellow Christ* 1889, Whiteley kept in his mind's eye like a mystical lighthouse. He did not want to be seen as merely a soft-centred lyricist. Something in him wanted to be a bad boy, a larrikin who might scratch the minds of his audience out of their complacency. In doing so he laid himself open to the charge of gimmickry: he built a piece of sculpture out of a shark's jaw; made an owl out of a beach thong; painted a work on the theme of van Gogh with a stretcher thrusting out from the picture, a little electric light, and masses of white pigment as if vomited onto the canvas; and he painted a self-portrait showing himself as a simian beast ravaged and savaged by heroin.

It is difficult to reconcile his sometimes shocking, sometimes crass, and occasionally ill-conceived projects with such paintings as *River at Marulan* 1976, or *Summer at Carcoar* 1977, and the most beautiful of his bird paintings, whose languorous movement and luminous colour speak of an artist with a joyous love of nature and its seasons. It is even more difficult to do so with the drawings of birds, animals, landscapes and the human figure made with a humour and tenderness that could almost meet on equal terms the Asian artists he so admired. But reconcile we must, because it was Whiteley's conviction that every imaginable mood conjured its opposite, and to him that state of affairs was an inevitable contract between art and life.

Barry Pearce  
Head curator of Australian art

- 1 Artist's notebook 1960–61, private collection, quoted in Pearce 1995, p15
- 2 Robert Hughes, 'The Shirley Temple of English art? Brett Whiteley's splash in the mainstream' *The Bulletin*, (Sydney), 18 Dec 1965
- 3 Lee Krasner quoted in Hughes 1965
- 4 This statement, dated 3 March 1989, was one of several written by Whiteley in preparation for Don Featherstone's film on him entitled *Difficult pleasure*.



Whiteley in his studio at Reiby Place, Circular Quay, Sydney 1981  
Photo: Graham McCarter

# Biography

## 1939

Born 7 April, Sydney, Australia. Grew up at 18 Lucretia Avenue, Longueville.

## 1946

Won first art competition: annual RSPCA exhibition at Farmer's Blaxland Gallery for *The driver sits in the shade but what about the horse?*

## 1948

Sent to boarding school at Scots College, Bathurst.

## 1954

Saw Lloyd Rees's European paintings exhibition at Macquarie Galleries, Sydney. Briefly attended Scots College, Sydney 1954–55.

**1956** Awarded first prize, Young Painters' Section, Bathurst Show, New South Wales. Left school mid-year, and worked in Sydney for Lintas Advertising Agency in the layout and commercial art department. His mother Beryl Whiteley left Australia for London.

## 1956–59

Met Wendy Julius, who was attending the National Art School in East Sydney, where Whiteley and Michael Johnson occasionally drew at the life drawing class. Sometimes attended sketch clubs such as John Santry's sketch club (also frequented by Lloyd Rees) on Thursday nights. Used the glasshouse at his home in Longueville as a studio. Sporadically attended life drawing at Julian Ashton Art School. Painted on weekends around Bathurst, Sofala, Hill End and the south coast of New South Wales. Painted at Sydney Soup Kitchen and night refuge.

## 1959

Encouraged by Australian artist William Pidgeon, left Lintas in August to paint works for the Italian scholarship. In November awarded Italian Government Travelling Art Scholarship for 1960, judged by Sir Russell Drysdale at the Art Gallery of New South Wales. Whiteley submitted four paintings: *Sofala, Dixon Street, July painting* and *Around Bathurst* – the painting that won him the scholarship.

## 1960

Arrived on 25 February in Naples on board the *Fairstar*. Spent March to May in Rome and Florence. Had an apartment

in Rome near the Spanish Steps with his mother Beryl. Visited Australian sculptor Stephen Walker, recipient of the same Italian scholarship, in Florence, and found a studio in the same building.

Brief visits to Paris and London. While in London took portfolio around galleries and was selected for a group show by McRoberts and Tunnard. On 14 June met Wendy in Paris and after two weeks returned to Florence studio. From 20 July to 1 September exhibited in group show at McRoberts and Tunnard Gallery, London, with Tadashi Sato, Douglas Swan and Philip Weichberger.

Sold three gouaches for £18 and one reserved at £9. Travelled throughout Italy, including to Siena and Arezzo. Haunted the Uffizi Gallery immersed in work by artists of the 14th and 15th centuries, particularly Cimabue, Duccio and Piero della Francesca. In August spent three days in Venice to see the Biennale with Michael Johnson, visiting Morandi in Grizzana.

In November moved to London, 129 Ladbroke Grove W11, where Michael Johnson was already living. In December met British painters William Scott and Roger Hilton and other Australian artists then in London, including Arthur Boyd and John Passmore. Met Bryan Robertson director of Whitechapel Gallery. Included in *Survey of recent Australian painting* at the Whitechapel Art Gallery, from which *Untitled red painting* was purchased by the Tate Gallery.

## 1962

Solo exhibition 9–31 March, *Paintings and gouaches*, Matthieson Gallery, London. Exhibited at the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, and travelled in Holland with Australian artist Lawrence Daws. Exhibited at the Berlin World Fair in the Stuyvesant Collection, then travelled to Baden-Baden, Stuttgart and to Venice for the biennale.

Married Wendy Julius on 27 March at Chelsea Registry Office, London. From April to September travelled through Europe with his father, Clem, visiting Rome, Paris, Barcelona and the Hautes-Pyrénées, where they stayed with American painter George Sheridan. Clem returned to Australia (the last time

Whiteley saw his father). With friend Wendy Paramour, the Whiteleys spent five months in the south of France in old farm houses at Sigean and travelled to Spain and Germany.

In October travelled to the United States, visiting New York, Connecticut and Washington. Met de Kooning. Returned to London in November and moved into 13 Pembridge Crescent.

## 1963

Spent six and a half months completing *Summer at Sigean*. Afterwards commenced the bathroom series. Work selected for *Australian painting* exhibition at the Tate Gallery, London, and *British painting in the '60s*, which opened at the Whitechapel Gallery in London, before touring Great Britain and Switzerland.

April in France. On 3 May Clem Whiteley died aged 55. *Australian group show*, Marlborough Gallery, London. Exhibited with Lawrence Daws, Jack Carrington Smith and Keith Vaughan at The National Gallery of Rhodesia, Africa. From 15 November to 22 December exhibited in the Dunn International, Fredericton, Canada, and Tate Gallery, London. In December moved to Holman Hunt's old studio at 18A Melbury Road, London.

## 1964

Awarded International Drawings Prize for *Bather and heater* 1964, Internationale der Zeichnung, Darmstadt, Germany.

Awarded travel grant from the Stuyvesant Foundation. Awarded Perth Festival Art Prize, Australia. From March to May exhibited in *The new generation* 1964, Whitechapel Art Gallery, London, with *Woman in a bath* 5 1963–64, *Bather and mirror* 1964, *Figure at the basin* 1963 and *Sketch for large mirror painting* 1964. From May to June travelled to Deya, Majorca. Three works exhibited in *Documenta III*, Kassel, Germany: *Bather and mirror* 1964, *Woman washing her face* 1964 and *Woman sitting on side of bath* 1963. Daughter Arkie born on 6 November at St George's Hospital, London.

## 1965

Exhibited in Australia, France, Belgium and Italy. *Treasures from the Commonwealth*, Commonwealth Festival Exhibition,

Burlington House, London. From June to July travelled to Deya, Majorca. November to December exhibited *Untitled dark painting* 1963, and *Christie and Hectorina McLennan* 1964 in *The English eye*, Marlborough-Gerson Gallery, New York. Exhibited in group show *Marlborough Prints*, at Marlborough New London Gallery, London. Awarded T E Wardle Invitation Art Prize, Perth, Australia. In December returned to Australia for the summer, staying at Whale Beach, north of Sydney.

#### 1966

In February included in a group show with David Hockney and Arthur Boyd. Exhibited at Clune Galleries, Sydney, with *The zoo graphics*. From 10 March to 16 April exhibition of the Mertz Collection, *The Australian painters 1964–1966* at the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington DC, USA: *Woman in bath* 1964, *The boxing match* 1965, *Cheetah in Rillington Place* 1964 and *Head of Christie* 1964. From 6 April to 22 May exhibited in *British graphics* at Museum Boymans-van Beuningen, Rotterdam. Exhibited in group show *Marlborough graphics*, Marlborough New London Gallery, London. Returned to London via Calcutta mid-year. Work selected for exhibition at Palais des Beaux-Arts, Brussels.

#### 1967

Exhibited at Pittsburgh International Carnegie Institute, Pittsburgh, USA, and awarded Harkness Foundation Scholarship. May to June travelled in Majorca, Tangier and Madrid before sailing on the *Queen Mary* to New York in September. Moved into a penthouse apartment at the Chelsea Hotel. *Australian group exhibition*, Whitechapel Gallery, London.

#### 1969

In July fled New York for Fiji and lived in a bure at Navutuleva, about 72km along the coast from Suva. Spent five months in Fiji. Group show at Cunard-Marlborough Gallery (on board the *Queen Elizabeth II* for its maiden voyage). Fined £F50 in Suva for possession of a drug. Returned in November to Australia, moving to Lavender Bay, Sydney.

#### 1970–72

Involved with The Yellow House artist's community in Potts Point, Sydney.

#### 1971

From 9–18 November showed in group exhibition *The bonsai show*, Australian Galleries, Melbourne. Rented Gasworks studio in Waverton, Sydney.

#### 1972

In February began work on *Alchemy*. Exhibited in *Australian painters and tapestries of the past 20 years*, New South Wales House, London.

#### 1973

In January completed work *Alchemy*. Exhibited *Alchemy* at Bonython Gallery, Sydney. In June travelled to Mauritius and Kenya.

#### 1974

'Moved from alcohol to more serious mind altering chemicals', quote from interview with Philip Adams. Exhibited at The World Expo, Spokane, Washington, USA.

#### 1975

Awarded Sir William Anglis Memorial Art Prize, Melbourne. Included in *Australian painting* exhibition, People's Republic of China. Moved from Gasworks studio in Waverton to downstairs in Lavender Bay house.

#### 1976

Archibald Prize for *Self portrait in the studio* 1976. Sir John Sulman Prize for *Interior with time past* 1976 (genre painting).

#### 1977

Wynne Prize for *The jacaranda tree (on Sydney Harbour)* 1977. March to April in London. In August stayed with Joel Elenberg at Arthur Boyd's Italian house, Casa Paletaio, in Pisa. Travelled to Venice, Florence and Rome.

#### 1978

Archibald Prize for *Art, life and the other thing* 1978. Wynne Prize for *Summer at Carcoar* 1977. Sir John Sulman Prize for *Yellow nude* 1978. In June travelled to Bali. August in New Caledonia and back to Bali in September. Exhibited four works at Cologne International Art Fair.

#### 1979

Joel Elenberg shared studio with Whiteley in Lavender Bay.

#### 1980

June to September in Bali with Joel Elenberg and his family, Anna and Zahava, until Elenberg's death.

#### 1981

Moved to studio in Reiby Place, Circular Quay. November in Vanuatu.

#### 1982

Travelled to Spain, Germany, France. Returning to Australia, stopped in Rome to work with Walter Rossi on three etchings at Vigna Antoniniana, Rome.

#### 1983

Travelled to Central Australia in the summer with Michael Driscoll and worked on the publication *Native rose*.

#### 1984

Awarded Wynne Prize for *South coast after the rain* 1984. July in London.

#### 1985

Purchased an old T shirt factory in Surry Hills, Sydney, and converted it into a studio. Travelled to London in May; Wendy remained in England.

#### 1986

Travelled to India to meet Wendy in Bombay and returned to Australia together.

#### 1987

Travelled to London with Wendy. Wendy remained in London.

#### 1989

Divorced from Wendy. May to August in London and Morocco, spending two months in Paris in an apartment on Rue de Tournon. Travelled for five weeks in Bali, Tokyo and Kyoto with Janice Spencer. October in Byron Bay, New South Wales.

#### 1991

Awarded Order of Australia (General Division) on June 10.

#### 1992

Died at Thirroul, New South Wales, 15 June.

# Glossary

**Abstraction** art that does not portray a physical likeness or representation of the real or imagined world. Instead, abstract art tends to use colour and form in a non-representational or subjective way.

**Aesthetics** pertaining to perception by the senses. Aesthetics in art refers to the artist's creative skills and to the audience's consideration of the finer aspects of art.

**Alchemy** the ancient tradition of sacred chemistry, in particular of attempting to convert base metals into gold.

**Arabesque** a scrolling or interlacing plant form, the most typical motif of Islamic ornamentation.

**Autobiography** a person's own life story written by that person.

**Background** area in a painting that appears in the distance.

**Body of work** series of artworks produced by an artist over a period of time.

**Byzantine** a general term to describe art during the medieval period that preceded the Renaissance. It was an art of stylisation which was also ritualistic.

**Collage** a work made from the assemblage of different materials, such as photographic images, newspaper cuttings and fabric into one whole form. Collage became an accepted artistic technique in the early 20th century with the production of various printed publications.

**Calligraphy** is the art of handwriting. In China and Japan the practice of calligraphy with brush and ink is one of the three perfections (calligraphy, painting and poetry).

**Composition** the plan and arrangement of the elements in a work.

**Curator** preserves and cares for artistic, historic or cultural items in a collection, gallery or museum.

**Distortion** pulling or twisting out of shape.

**Figurative** a drawing or painting of something recognisable rather than an abstract rendering.

**Foreshortening** a way of representing an object so that it conveys the illusion of depth – so that it seems to thrust forward or go back into space

**Foreground** the area in a painting that seems closest to the viewer.

**Gaze** the projected view of a figure; who or what they are looking at.

**Gesture** significant movement of the body, calculated or spontaneous.

**Illustrative** to make clear with pictures.

**Landscape** a piece of land-based scenery. Landscape art is the artistic depiction of landscape scenery.

**Homage** is a reference to someone within an artistic work. In this sense, homage is the artist's recognition of this person's influence on them.

**Larrikin** someone who is irreverent or mocking of authority.

**Metamorphosis** a transformation from one state of being to another.

**Mixed media** the use of a variety of media in an artwork.

**Perspective** the accurate representation of distance or depth as viewed by the human eye.

**Portrait** a painting, photograph or other artistic representation of a person.

**Portfolio** a selection of an artist's work to highlight their skills and strengths.

**Pose** position in which the body is held in place without moving.

**Reductive** taken back to the basics.

**Renaissance** a revival of cultural production and learning that took place in Europe during the 14th and 15th centuries, particularly in Italy. The period was characterised by a renewed interest in ancient Greek and Roman art and design, and included an emphasis on the environment, science, art and philosophy.

**Retrospective** the specific selection of artworks for an exhibition of an artist's career.

**Reproductions** printed or digital copies of original artworks, as found in art books or on the web.

**Scholarship** financial support for education, often made by an institution on the basis of academic or artistic merit.

**Self-portrait** the representation of yourself in a work of art.

**Still life** a work of art depicting inanimate subject matter, both natural (eg, flowers, fruit) or made (cups, vases) objects.

**Studio** the workroom of an artist, such as a painter, sculptor or photographer.

**Style** a characteristic way or technique of producing things, especially a work of art.

**Traditions** the principles held and generally followed by any branch of art or literature acquired from and handed down by experience and practice.

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## SECTION 2

# SYLLABUS FOCUS

## Works in profile

- 1** EARLY WORKS **Sofala** 1958
- 2** ABSTRACTION **Two miles to get the letters** 1962–65
- 3** BATHROOM SERIES **Woman in bath** 1963 (reworked 1964)
- 4** CHRISTIE & LONDON ZOO **Christie** 1965
- 5** LAVENDER BAY **Big orange (sunset)** 1974
- 6** PORTRAITS **Self-portrait in the studio** 1976
- 7** BIRDS **The lyrebird** 1972–73
- 8** LANDSCAPES **The 15 great dog pisses of Paris** 1989
- 9** THE STUDIO & LATE WORKS **Far North Queensland – Port Douglas** 1992

# 1

## EARLY WORKS

... about eleven I decided, and I quite deliberately decided, that I would go into an art which I didn't have to answer to anyone; that apart from a framer, and plausibly a dealer, it would be a one-man band.

BRETT WHITELEY in Pearce 1995, p 15

Brett Whiteley was born in Sydney on 7 April 1939. He lived in the northern suburb of Longueville and attended Chatswood Primary School, then Scots College in Bathurst. After leaving school in 1956 at the age of 17, Whiteley worked in Sydney for the advertising agency Lintas. Apart from attending evening drawing classes and sketch clubs, he was largely self-taught. During the next three and a half years he produced several drawings and paintings containing qualities which he carried into his later work.

His early inspiration came from a mixture of art and life experiences. There were the books and reproductions of international painters such as William Scott, Ben Shahn, Giotto, Arshile Gorky, Amedeo Modigliani, Giorgio Morandi and Pablo Picasso. Whiteley also looked at the original Australian paintings of Lloyd Rees, William Dobell, Sali Herman and especially Russell Drysdale, whose palette and landscape forms influenced him profoundly.

He was also influenced by the landscapes around him – the country towns of Hill End, Sofala and Bathurst, not to mention the streets and buildings of Sydney, where he lived and worked. Their shapes, textures and colours remained prevalent in his work, even after he left Australia for Europe at the beginning of 1960. Russell Drysdale, who awarded Whiteley an Italian travelling scholarship, recognised in Whiteley a feeling for abstraction then dominating the concerns of most young artists in Australia. Drysdale also saw in Whiteley someone who was aware of, and prepared to accommodate, the traditions of older painters such as himself.

## K–6 LOOKING AND MAKING ACTIVITIES

**VISUAL ART** Imagine walking through *Sofala*. List the local features depicted by Whiteley. What gives you this impression? What do the earthy colours in *Sofala* remind you of? Using primary colours and white only, practise mixing earthy tones. Select the colours you feel represent your local area. Use these colours as the basis for a painting.

**HSIE** Locate Sofala, Hill End and Bathurst on a map. Search the library and Internet for photographs of these towns. Compare the photographs with paintings by Russell Drysdale and Brett Whiteley. Explore the history of central-western New South Wales. Research the industries in these towns.

## 7–12 FRAMING QUESTIONS

- Consider why generations of Australian artists have been fascinated by the landscapes of central-western New South Wales. Research and compare the Sofala paintings of artists Russell Drysdale and Donald Friend. What did Whiteley gain from responding to these artists' works? What did Drysdale mean when he suggested that Whiteley was aware of, and prepared to accommodate, the traditions of older painters like himself?
- Research the artist-in-residency program currently available in Hill End for emerging artists. Write a proposal to be selected, considering the requirements for selection. Search the Internet to discover contemporary artists currently working in Hill End and study their interpretations of that environment (see [www.hillendart.com](http://www.hillendart.com)).

# 1

## EARLY WORKS

**Sofala** 1958

oil on canvas on board, 65.5 x 85.8 cm board; 83.8 x 95.6 x 2.9 cm frame

Purchased by the NSW state government 1994, transferred to the Art Gallery of New South Wales 1998

© Whiteley Estate



# 2

## ABSTRACTION

Every painting of Whiteley's is a roll in the hay with the muse of art history: as soon as an issue about the nature of art or perception was raised by another painter – Gorky, de Kooning, Bacon, Giacometti, Rauschenberg, Johns, Warhol, Piero della Francesca, Uccello, Masaccio – Whiteley was into it, either painting his way through it or arguing it out.

ROBERT HUGHES, art critic, in Pearce 1995, p 25

Whiteley arrived in Italy at the beginning of 1960 and stayed for about ten months. Basing himself first in Rome, then Florence, he spent most of his time looking at paintings in churches and museums, developing a particular interest in late Byzantine and early Renaissance artists, for example Cimabue, Duccio, Uccello and Piero della Francesca.

During this period Whiteley made a few paintings that were derived from the goldfields landscapes he had painted in Australia but informed by the still lifes of British artist William Scott and the semi-erotic abstractions of American artist Arshile Gorky.

After moving to London, where he remained based for the next seven years, Whiteley continued to combine these elements – the earthy colours of Australia, as reflected in the paintings of Russell Drysdale, and the ambience of Italian painting and architecture – with powerful hybrid forms of landscape and the female torso. Such paintings glowed with a confident command of their visual sources while conveying an acute awareness of the current modes of abstraction. Three works shown in Bryan Robertson's exhibition of recent Australian painting at the Whitechapel Gallery in 1961 created a sensation; the Tate gallery's purchase of *Untitled red painting* 1960 establishing his international reputation. He was 22 years of age.

After Whiteley married Wendy Julius in March 1962, they spent six months in Sigean, a town in the south of France near the Spanish border. Whiteley's most elegant and relaxed abstract work emerged from his idyllic life there. He saw for the first time the creamy slopes dotted with olive trees that had attracted him to the backgrounds of paintings by Piero della Francesca, and he dispersed his shapes according to the general feeling of the Mediterranean environment. Sigean signalled a move away from both landscape and abstraction into figuration.

### K–6 LOOKING AND MAKING ACTIVITIES

**VISUAL ART** Focus on your local area, identifying key sites and landmarks. Create a bird's-eye view drawing. Simplify your aerial view into abstract shapes. Use this drawing as the basis for an abstract landscape painting.

**ENGLISH** Compose a narrative about this painting. Write a personal account of travelling the two miles to collect the letters. Describe the landscape around you. Use all your senses.

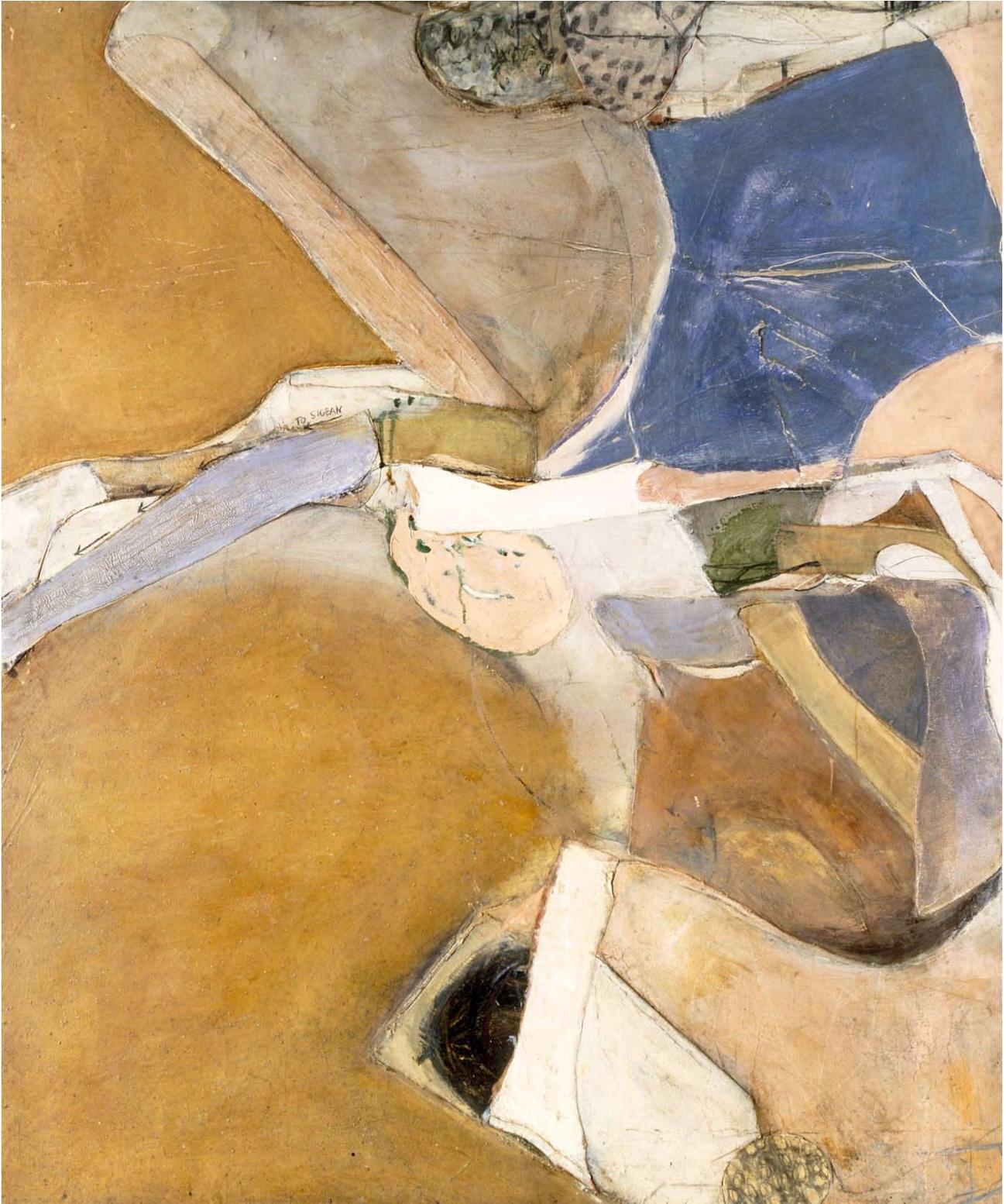
### 7–12 FRAMING QUESTIONS

- Winning the Italian Travelling Scholarship exposed Whiteley to European artists that influenced him greatly. Consider the impact of viewing actual Byzantine and early Renaissance artworks. Notice the typically Mediterranean backgrounds. Discuss Whiteley's use of Mediterranean light and colours in his abstractions.
- Whiteley's approach to abstraction was greatly influenced by the still-life paintings of William Scott, Ben Shahn and Arshile Gorky. Find images of works by these artists. Assess how Whiteley fused these influences and outline the similarities with these artists and the differences Whiteley developed from them.

# 2

## ABSTRACTION

**Two miles to get the letters** 1962–65  
charcoal, tempera, oil and linseed oil, collage, on plywood  
122 x 101.7 cm board; 123 x 102.2 x 5 cm frame  
© Whiteley Estate



# 3

## BATHROOM SERIES

With both the Sigean abstractions and bathroom series, the colour and the flattening of the form was an acknowledgement of his love of Piero della Francesca. The actual landscape and our lifestyle was closer to Piero's time than our own century seemed ... The surrounding countryside was very much like the background to the Baptism of Christ – the creamy and dry greens with the dots.

WENDY WHITELEY in Pearce 1995, p 43

Following their stay in Sigean, the Whiteleys travelled to Spain and New York before returning to London and settling into a new studio. The last Sigean abstractions that Whiteley worked on show an increasing preoccupation with the female torso, as though seen from a distance and in multiple forms dispersed across a shallow pictorial field. He then began his bathroom series, preserving the warm reds and honey colours of his abstractions while combining them with the bathroom's acid blues and greens.

Whiteley started to focus on the single figure, the naked form of Wendy in the bath, capturing the tactility and tones of her flesh with an intimacy rarely equalled in his later paintings of the same subject. Something of the colours and broad shapes of Piero della Francesca's works was retained, but a closer tradition of figurative painting was making an impact on him, particularly through the work of Pierre Bonnard and Francis Bacon. Indeed, one of Bonnard's most striking bath paintings was at the Tate gallery and Whiteley was impressed by a reproduction of this he saw in the studio of William Scott.

Whiteley exhibited his bathroom pictures at the Marlborough New London Gallery in 1964, and one painting was purchased by the Tate gallery, the second in just a few years. Most importantly, the bathroom series signified Whiteley's breakthrough as a figure draughtsman and his desire to make eroticism more explicit.

In the catalogue to the exhibition *New generation: 1964* at the Whitechapel Gallery he wrote: 'All the paintings I have made in the last four years have been concerned one way or another with sex and the desire to record sensual behaviour.'

### K–6 LOOKING AND MAKING ACTIVITIES

**VISUAL ART** Is the figure in the painting still or moving? How has Whiteley suggested this? Can you find any straight lines? What do the lines suggest? Use mixed media and experiment to create watery effects.

**MUSIC** Compile a list of sounds that could be associated with water: running water, splashing, gurgling and the pop of bubbles from the bath. Create a musical composition to go with this Whiteley series. Find examples of music inspired by water.

### 7–12 FRAMING QUESTIONS

- Outline how Whiteley has elongated and distorted the figure of Wendy Whiteley. Use charcoal to draw a figure from various angles on the same page, overlapping the different poses. Select sections of the sketches to erase so the figure becomes distorted and movement is suggested. Display your works in class.
- Explore the genre of the nude in an interior. Investigate Pierre Bonnard's and Francis Bacon's use of interiors. Discuss the influence of Bonnard and Bacon on Whiteley during his early years in London.

# 3

## BATHROOM SERIES

**Woman in bath** 1963 (reworked 1964)

oil, paper, graphite and tempera on plywood

183.1 x 218.7 cm board; 188 x 224 x 6.3 cm frame

Purchased with funds provided by the Art Gallery Society of New South Wales 2000

© Whiteley Estate



# 4

## CHRISTIE AND LONDON ZOO SERIES

The fact that Whiteley could take a subject so loaded with journalistic associations, and turn it into art, is the measure of his power for transformation ...

ROBERT HUGHES, art critic, in Pearce 1995, p 26

When the Whiteleys arrived in London at the end of 1960, they moved to an apartment building in Ladbroke Grove, which was then a working-class district popular with other Australian and British artists. There Whiteley became fascinated with a milieu of London violence that was hidden away, festering behind closed doors.

He lived not far from Rillington Place, where the necrophile murderer John Christie had killed several women, mainly prostitutes, during the 1940s and early 50s. Posing as a doctor, Christie had lured his victims on the pretext of curing their ailments with a special balsamic inhalant. After gassing them, he ravished their bodies and hid them in the walls of his house.

The research that Whiteley did for this series of paintings and drawings, exhibited in 1965 at Marlborough New London Gallery, especially in contrast with his previous works on the bathroom theme, reflects his preoccupation with duality. Moving almost entirely away from the soft-focus ambience of abstraction, he now examined with sharp explicitness the evil side of the sexual drive within the human condition.

His artistic mentor was Francis Bacon; unlike the British painter, however, Whiteley invested his nudes with a sensuality underlining a new-found command of figure draughtsmanship. Equally significant, the Christie series was a response to his father's death in 1963 in Sydney, an event he would never adequately come to terms with.

Painted and exhibited at the same time were the London Zoo pictures. These were an essential complement to the Christie series, particularly in relation to Bacon's caged figures. Whiteley's spirited paintings and drawings of giraffes, monkeys and lions may also be appreciated in the context of his ongoing feeling of connection with the animal and bird kingdoms.

### K-6 LOOKING AND MAKING ACTIVITIES

**VISUAL ART** Collect material about a current news story. Collage images from newspapers, magazines and your own sketches to illustrate it.

**MATHS** Grid out this Whiteley image and work out the percentages of text and image.

### 7-12 FRAMING QUESTIONS

- Whiteley wanted to 'take something as bad as the human condition could get ... [and] try to define evil'.\* Do you think he was successful? Discuss.
- Assess the impact of using photographs of individuals involved and actual newspaper text in this artwork. Consider historical events recorded by Goya, Warhol and Picasso. Research one of these artists, discuss their interpretation of a specific event and compare to Whiteley's approach in the Christie series.

\* McGrath 1995, p 58

# 4

## CHRISTIE AND LONDON ZOO SERIES

Christie 1965  
 pen and ink, charcoal, gouache, oil, collage  
 78.8 x 57.3 cm sheet; 70 x 55.3 cm sight; 103.4 x 77.9 x 3.3 cm frame  
 © Whiteley Estate



# 5

## LAVENDER BAY

The paintings ... begin from the ... highest point of affection – points of optical ecstasy, where romanticism and optimism overshadow any form of menace or foreboding ... Almost all the works have been rendered in a lyrical and personal style where colour ... has this time been used in saturation.

BRETT WHITELEY, introduction to the exhibition *Lavender Bay series* 1974, in McGrath 1979, pp 168–70

After the birth of their daughter, Arkie, in 1964 in London, the Whiteleys visited Australia. They arrived in Sydney in the summer of 1965 and Whiteley soon began to think of Australia in terms of its geographical relationship to Asia rather than its Anglo-Celtic colonial beginnings. Two exhibitions held in 1966 coincided with their Australian stay.

They travelled back to England via Calcutta. This was later reflected in the works he exhibited in London. Whiteley was awarded a Harkness Fellowship from 1967 to 1969 to live in New York. In July 1969 Whiteley flew to Fiji, seeking the refuge of a world far removed from the chaos and stress he encountered. Wendy and Arkie followed shortly after, and for a few months he enjoyed the tranquillity he had known in Sigean seven years earlier. It was his attempt to glimpse the pure states of paradise envisaged by Baudelaire and Gauguin. Sadly, the period in Fiji was short lived and by November the Whiteley's were back in Sydney, with mixed feelings about remaining in Australia for very long.

They found a house in Lavender Bay, through friend and architect Rollin Schicht, who had been in London at the same time as the Whiteleys. Schicht was now living with his family on the upper floor. The ambience of the house, which the Whiteleys purchased a few years later, and the harbour offered a perfect vehicle for Whiteley's gift at composing works with large, empty spaces, and evoked strong feelings that at last he had come home. Inspired mainly by Matisse and particularly his masterpiece *The red studio* 1911, Whiteley focused on three main subjects during the 1970s: interiors, harbour views and table-top still lifes. Unlike the vision of Matisse however, there are small hints that all was not perfect in paradise. In several paintings, harbour glimpses are escape routes from enclosures, and there are subtle manifestations of the restlessness that became more explicit in Whiteley's portraits during this time and into the 1980s.

### K–6 LOOKING AND MAKING ACTIVITIES

**VISUAL ART** Use colour to represent a landscape throughout the seasons.

**SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY** Locate Lavender Bay on a map of Sydney. List key landmarks of Sydney you can see from Lavender Bay. How is Sydney Harbour used today? Collate data and chart your results.

### 7–12 FRAMING QUESTIONS

- Consider the scale of this work and its effect on you, the viewer. Whiteley described this body of work as 'soaking in perfume'.\* What did he mean? Give examples from the painting. Compare this painting to other monochrome artworks. Wander around the harbour and absorb the sights, sounds and smells. Create your own harbour view painting based on the various landmarks and activities that occur in Sydney Harbour. Select a warm or cool colour palette for your painting.
- Research the work of 20th-century artists who used colour fields as their main element and source of personal expression. Create a series of abstract paintings, photographs or computer graphics inspired by sunset skies.

\* interview with Phillip Adam, radio 2UE Sydney, Sept 1986

# 5

## LAVENDER BAY

**Big orange (sunset)** 1974

oil and collage on wood  
244.0 x 305.0cm board; 246.0 x 307.2 x 4.8cm frame  
Gift of Patrick White 1974  
© Whiteley Estate



# 6

## PORTRAITS

The big self portrait looking at himself in the mirror is extraordinarily honest in some ways. He makes no attempt to hide the fact that he is somewhere else ... He was trying silently to say, Stay away, this is not what it might seem. Look at this beautiful house and wonderful pictures and things. But there was another side – that’s duality of life – and that’s where Brett’s pictures moved away from Matisse’s.

WENDY WHITELEY in Pearce 1995, p 48

After returning to Australia at the end of 1969, Whiteley produced many works which covered a spectrum of moods – from the startling imagery of *Alchemy* to the calm ecstasy of landscape and harbour views to the implied violence of his van Gogh paintings. The contrasts of moods, which often existed side-by-side in one work, reflected Whiteley’s interest in duality, or the conflict of opposing states of being. He was also obsessed with ideas about schizophrenia. Whiteley followed the writings of British psychiatrist R D Laing, who created self-induced states of madness in order to analyse certain disjunctive aspects of the human condition.

From the mid 1960s therefore, many of Whiteley’s portraits can be seen not so much as optical studies but as explorations of the psyche, whether his own or that of others with whom he identified. A number of self-portraits show Whiteley’s image split into multiples, perhaps of himself, or of other identities. Such projections into alternative states can also be read into the face of a weeping woman, or even the birds and animals that inhabit Whiteley’s landscapes.

Perhaps the first portraits in Australian art that dealt seriously with emotional or psychological archetypes were painted by Arthur Boyd and Albert Tucker in Melbourne during the 1940s. Whiteley added to this legacy in 1964 with his Christie images. In the subsequent two decades, Whiteley produced spectacular portraits of his heroes – van Gogh, Rembrandt, Gauguin, Dylan, Baudelaire, Rimbaud and Bacon, focusing with particular fascination on those who had, as he perceived in himself, addictive personalities.

Whiteley won the acclaimed Archibald Prize for portraiture twice in quick succession, in 1976 with his *Self-portrait in the studio* and in 1978 with his confronting *Art, life and the other thing*.

### K–6 LOOKING AND MAKING ACTIVITIES

**VISUAL ART** Look at self-portraits in art history. Use a hand-held mirror to sketch or paint your own portrait.

**SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY** Select objects and place yourself in your favourite room.

Take a series of digital images or draw a series of sketches of your favourite place and several items that are important to you. Scan and collage these images together to create a self-portrait to display in class.

### 7–12 FRAMING QUESTIONS

- Compare *Self-portrait in the studio* to Henri Matisse’s *The red studio* of 1911. Consider how Whiteley personalised the theme of the artist and studio. According to curator Barry Pearce, ‘Unlike Matisse, Whiteley never emptied his ego completely from such subjects.’\* Discuss this quote.
- How does this work challenge the conventions of self-portraiture? How does Whiteley balance both public and private aspects of his life in this painting? Locate the various artworks by Whiteley within view. List the items found in this studio. Identify elements of collage. Research why the Board of Trustees of the Art Gallery of NSW awarded Whiteley the Archibald Prize in 1976 for *Self-portrait in the studio* and in 1978 for *Art, life and the other thing*. Compare these self-portraits.

\* Pearce 1995, p 35

# 6

## PORTRAITS

### Self-portrait in the studio 1976

oil, collage, hair on canvas  
200.5 x 259 cm stretcher; 210.5 x 268.5 x 5.7 cm frame  
Purchased 1977  
© Whiteley Estate



# 7 BIRDS

He was mad about eggs, loved their shape and symbolism ... I was almost crucified for stealing eggs from a bird's nest for Brett. His huge appreciation of nature was evident from childhood – he rejoiced in the optical look of the world and delighted in making art out of it.

FRAN HOPKIRK, Whiteley's sister, in Hawley 1993, p 40

Of all the subjects Brett Whiteley painted in his career, landscapes gave him the greatest sense of release. At school in Bathurst he set up his easel at the back of the classroom and drew views through the window. The soft hills and fields of surrounding countryside were indelibly embedded in his repertoire of images and fed his imagination over many years.

After leaving school, he explored the edges of Sydney Harbour to emulate the visions of Lloyd Rees; he travelled to Sofala and Hill End in central-western New South Wales in the path of Russell Drysdale; and from the late 1970s fell under the influence of Japanese and Chinese art and of Gauguin's painting *The yellow Christ* 1889, which reinforced his need to create landscape as a sanctuary. In many of his other themes Whiteley confronted the difficult questions of his psyche, landscape provided a means of escape, an unencumbered absorption into a painless, floating world.

As he moved around the NSW countryside – Oberon, Marulan, Carcoar, Bathurst – and the glasshouse mountains in Queensland, he depicted the landscape in all its seasons and shifts of mood. Repetition of certain motifs symbolised states of mind: trees, rocks and arabesques of rivers echoing the flightpaths of birds, which in turn represented his relaxed journey through his own domain. But birds in particular held a poignant place in his visual language. He had loved them since his childhood, and in his last phase of work they represented a yearning at once for domestic stability and personal freedom. It is not surprising Whiteley held two special exhibitions dedicated to the theme in Sydney: the first in 1979; the second in 1988 in his Surry Hills studio, four years before his death.

## K–6 LOOKING AND MAKING ACTIVITIES

**VISUAL ART** Is the lyrebird quiet or singing? How has Whiteley portrayed the action of this bird? Sketch birds in your local environment. Observe how they move. From memory, paint a work based on your observations. Consider using repetition of line or shapes. Include found objects which symbolise the bird or flight.

**SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY** Research birds found in your local area. Find images of birds to assist with identification. Define the terms 'native' and 'introduced' species. Which categories do the birds in your area fall into? Create a table for documenting sightings. Compare results with other students. Present your findings as a science report.

## 7–12 FRAMING QUESTIONS

- Whiteley had a life-long passion for birds. Reflect on the symbolic nature of birds and what they may have meant to Whiteley. Select a bird to represent you. Sketch a series of drawings based on your selected bird and an aspect of your life; combine these into one cohesive composition. Make drawings from photographs, memories and written descriptions.
- The vibrations of sound are illustrated as various painterly marks and collage. Discuss how Whiteley captures the essence of the lyrebird. Examine the techniques Whiteley used to display movement and stillness.
- The small inscription in the corner reads: 'a pointless painting needs looking at for a long time in order to think about it.' What is Whiteley suggesting to the viewer?

# 7

## BIRDS

### The lyrebird 1972-73

oil, red earth, wood, cloth, lyre bird tail, ink and collage on canvas  
198 x 183.5 x 26 cm  
© Whiteley Estate



# 8

## LANDSCAPES

This series pays homage to that district of the Ecole de Paris that Marquet, Utrillo and Nicholas de Staël opened up, but most particularly it is still Pablo's cheek that gets one out of bed in the morning and off down the street with the sketch pad under arm ... the fifty-year old art student recording this extraordinary city the way one dreamt of doing thirty years ago.

BRETT WHITELEY in *Whiteley* 1990

In Whiteley's late works his assured technique and style focused on his love of travel, landscapes and birds. Travels to London, Morocco, Japan and Paris allowed him to be anonymous and concentrate on his passion of drawing. These works reflected a state of mind still questioning, enthusiastic and excited by life. There were challenges still to explore in sculpture, drawing, collage and paint. *The 15 great dog pisses of Paris* 1989, was part of the Paris *Regard de Côte* series which Whiteley did over a two-month period between June and July 1989 while living in Rue de Tournon in Paris (the larger paintings he completed back at his Surry Hills studio). His only rule, self imposed, was to do 60 works in 60 days and this task he accomplished. Included in this series were drawings, paintings and photographs, which Whiteley considered were drawings of the eye.

When Whiteley first encountered Paris as a 20 year old, having just won the Italian Art Travelling Scholarship in 1960, he felt unable to visually express his time there. But the tools for drawing and painting he had acquired since, allowed him on his return years later to communicate his experiences of Paris.

The humorously titled *The 15 great dog pisses of Paris* suggests the urban streets littered with stains of the city's dogs, who are coveted and paraded by their owners. The work is grand in scale, which accentuates the sweep of line, and the use of collage interplays with the painted surface. The charcoal drawing is left as a conscious reminder of the journey of the painting. It highlights the legacy Matisse left to art and to which Whiteley was indebted. The physical texture of plaster on the wall sweeping toward the viewer enhances our experience. The gesture of the Seine flowing has been ragged with speed to suggest movement. The tonal relationship of butter creams and browns softens the image and reminds us of the stone from which Paris is built.

### K-6 LOOKING AND MAKING ACTIVITIES

**VISUAL ART** Look carefully at the street you live on and sketch pathways, walls and buildings. Take rubbings (frottage) and assemble this into one large work using a limited palette (colours).

**HSIE** The city of Paris has attracted artists from all over the world for centuries. Use your local library and the Internet to find more information about Paris. Select and research other artists who lived and worked in Paris.

### 7-12 FRAMING QUESTIONS

- Whiteley challenged himself to 'look at the obvious obscurely ... to introduce into each view the right amount of humour, or irony, or Dada'.\* How does *The 15 great dog pisses of Paris* illustrate this? Whiteley felt he could not capture Paris the first time he was there as a young man. Why did he think he was capable of responding to Paris as a 50 year old?
- During this period Whiteley set himself the task of creating a work a day over a two-month period. Why would Whiteley set such an ambitious task? Analyse the range of techniques used in this work and list them. Set yourself a goal for a body of work. Identify the subject matter, media and time frame. During this process record your experiences in your visual arts diary. Critique your work on completion. Did this process inspire or stifle you? Discuss the burden of this process.

\* Whiteley 1990, foreword

# 8

## LANDSCAPES

**The 15 great dog pisses of Paris** 1989  
charcoal, oil, collage, wax, plaster on canvas  
155 x 140 cm stretcher; 163 x 148 x 4.5 cm frame  
© Whiteley Estate



# 9

## THE STUDIO & LATE WORKS

I am determined to crush a coloured picture from that area within me that is game and wild and intoxicated – I want a garden that is a smear of Cambodian lipstick, green and mauves and lettuce green and magenta purple and ultramarine and arctic pale blue with lemon and orange and cadmium yellow against apple green and baby pink apricots. North Queensland. Can I do it?

BRETT WHITELEY written in preparation for the film *Difficult pleasure* 1989

### The Studio

**1985** Brett and Wendy Whiteley bought the building at 2 Raper Street, at which time was operating as a T-shirt factory. The courtyard had been enclosed but the floors were concrete and the walls in a state of disrepair. It was the first time Whiteley had owned a studio, apart from his home at Lavender Bay.

**1985–87** Brett Whiteley renovated the site and initially covered the downstairs floor area with plywood and covered the walls with plasterboard. He then painted the walls white to create a pristine and formal gallery space and moved in permanently in 1987 when he and Wendy separated.

**1988** The exhibition *Birds* (5–19 July) was the only formal exhibition he held and curated in this space.

**1992** Brett died on 15 June at the age of 53. His daughter Arkie returned from London and lived here, fulfilling his wish to create a museum in the event of his death.

**1993** The NSW government purchased the property from Arkie along with ten key works, including *Alchemy*.

**1995** In February the Brett Whiteley Studio was opened to the public as a museum, funded by the NSW government and managed by the Art Gallery of New South Wales.

There are approximately two to three exhibitions held at the Brett Whiteley Studio each year. They consist of solo Whiteley exhibitions and group exhibitions which place Whiteley in context with his contemporaries. Each exhibition explores different aspects of Whiteley's art, influences and life.

### K–6 LOOKING AND MAKING ACTIVITIES

**VISUAL ART** Whiteley produced this work from memory. What do you think the meandering roads suggest? How has Whiteley dealt with perspective? Imagine flying over this landscape; describe how the rich, tropical colours make you feel. List the various elements of the area that Whiteley has depicted. Extend this painting by drawing the landscape beyond the boundaries of the canvas.

**SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY** What is Far North Queensland renowned for? Research the climate, landscape and produce of this region. Why are certain products grown there?

### 7–12 FRAMING QUESTIONS

- Whiteley approached landscape painting with a tendency that he refers to as Chinese. Find images of traditional Chinese landscape painting and compare these images with *Far North Queensland – Port Douglas*. List the qualities you think Whiteley meant by the word 'Chinese' to describe this approach? Discuss the similarities and differences.
- Reflect on the quote below by Whiteley in terms of art making and motivation. Do you think Whiteley was successful in his goal?  
I want a garden that is a smear of Cambodian lipstick, green and mauves and lettuce green and magenta purple and ultramarine and arctic pale blue with lemon and orange and cadmium yellow against apple green and baby pink apricots. North Queensland. Can I do it?\*
- Find examples of Whiteley's landscapes and identify the signs and symbols that formed part of his visual language. Use the quote above as an inspiration to create an artwork. Compare your interpretation of this quote to Whiteley's painting.

\* This statement, dated 3 March 1989, was one of several written by Whiteley in preparation for Don Featherstone's film on him entitled *Difficult pleasure*. It reads in full: 'After seeing Bonnard's "Violet Countryside 1946 ©", in the *Readers Digest Collection* at the NSW Art Gallery I am determined to crush a coloured picture from that area within me that is game and wild and intoxicated – I want a garden that is a smear of Cambodian lipstick, green and mauves and lettuce green and magenta purple and ultramarine and arctic pale blue with lemon and orange and cadmium yellow against apple green and baby pink apricots. North Queensland. Can I do it?'

# 9

## THE STUDIO & LATE WORKS

Far North Queensland – Port Douglas 1992

oil, earth, charcoal, collage on plywood  
183.5 x 198 cm board; 185 x 200 x 4 cm frame  
© Whiteley Estate

