

EDUCATION COLLECTION NOTES

INVESTIGATING KEY WORKS OF ART IN THE GALLERY

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DAVID ASPDEN THE COLOUR OF MUSIC AND PLACE



Outer spice 1969
acrylic on canvas
152.4 x 244 cm
Purchased with funds provided by an anonymous
purchase fund for contemporary Australian art 1970
CA19.1970



Brazil no 3 1971
acrylic on canvas
267 x 240 cm
Gift of the Rudy Komon Memorial Fund 1985
2.1985



Coast II 1978
acrylic, collage on paper
76 x 55.7 cm
Gift of Karen Aspden 2008
134.2008



Black music 1995
oil on canvas
150 x 244 cm
D G Wilson Bequest Fund 2004
203.2004



DAVID ASPDEN

THE COLOUR OF MUSIC AND PLACE

‘... my painting is first an event or process, rather than a mere object. This process later involves the viewer in a structure of colour forces.’

David Aspden, 1969

‘For Aspden, colour, music and landscape were intertwined; they were the muses that drove him and shaped his sensibility.’

Curator, Anne Ryan, 2011



DAVID ASPDEN
AUSTRALIA 1935–2005

Photo: Robert Walker

Text is adapted from the essay in *David Aspden: the colour of music and place* by Anne Ryan with Helen Campbell, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, 2011

David Aspden has been described as a composer of paintings, an apt analogy for a man who surrounded himself with music – mostly classical and jazz – in his daily life.¹ For Aspden painting was an act of immersion, as much about the process as the creation of an all-encompassing colour environment. As Aspden put it: ‘... my painting is first an event or process, rather than a mere object. This process later involves the viewer in a structure of colour forces.’² He had a natural facility for bringing together, in an interlocking lyrical whole, the disparate elements of form and colour – from the ‘hard-edge’ paintings that established his reputation in the 1960s through to the more nuanced colour abstracts of the 1970s to 2000s in which his artistic vision found its purest expression.

Aspden’s early years as an artist coincided with the creative ferment of the 1960s, a period when he, like a number of other young Australian painters, turned to a highly refined and reductive formalism as a new way of thinking about and making art. Over time, Aspden gradually broke free from the formal constraints of these early paintings to create works that came to embody his particular response to place. Aspden was sustained by three major inspirations – colour, place and music – stimulated by such things as the play of light on water or through trees, or the music he played in his studio. His creative method was intuitive and immediate; he immersed himself in his processes with concentration and intensity, preferring an organic rather than an intellectual or conceptual approach to image-making.

Aspden was visually literate and well-read, interested in art from many periods and curious about the work of others. His travels always included visits to museums to see the work of his contemporaries and the art of earlier times. Matisse was a particular favourite for his mastery of colour and for his use of collage, a distinct and ongoing part of Aspden’s own practice. In Australia, Aspden formed friendships with other artists and sometimes worked with them, such as on the painting trip he took in 1982 with Frank Hodgkinson and Colin Lanceley to Kakadu National Park in the Northern Territory.

Born in the north of England in 1935, Aspden immigrated to Australia with his family as a teenager in 1949–50, where they settled in the industrial city of Wollongong south of Sydney. He left school soon after to take up an apprenticeship as a painter and sign-writer, but a nascent interest in art began to occupy more and more of his attention. Although he did not attend art school, Aspden actively sought the company of like-minded people, read art books voraciously and underwent self-imposed exercises in drawing and painting.³ He soon began to exhaust the limited artistic resources of Wollongong and felt a pull towards Sydney, which had by then become a vibrant and energetic centre for contemporary painting. He moved there in 1964, embracing the abundant opportunities to develop and exhibit his work, and to establish himself as a serious artist.

The Sydney art scene in the 1960s had an indelible impact on Aspden, and his move there coincided with an unequivocal shift

in his work towards abstraction. Local artists and collectors increasingly valued experimentation and individual expression and looked to international centres, particularly the United States, for inspiration and acceptance. Two touring exhibitions – *Contemporary American painting* and *Two decades of American painting* – came to Sydney in 1964 and 1967, presenting abstract expressionism, minimalism, pop and colour field painting to Australian audiences for the first time.⁴ Both exhibitions featured a diverse and idiosyncratic selection of works by major and secondary artists and excited considerable local controversy and interest.⁵ At the same time, local publications such as *Art and Australia* regularly featured articles on contemporary international art.⁶ A number of artists were drawn to the ideas of the American art critic Clement Greenberg who emphasised the primacy of the formal aspects of art – colour, line, shape and texture – over concerns of history, place or subject. Greenberg’s visit to Australia in 1968 cut a swathe through local artistic and academic circles.⁷ Many, including progressive Australian critics like Patrick McCaughey, adopted Greenberg’s theories about the ‘new abstraction’ – or what came to be known as ‘post-painterly abstraction’ – a movement that reached its apogee in 1968 with the National Gallery of Victoria’s landmark exhibition *The field*. Two of Aspden’s works were included in the exhibition – *Field 1* and *Fifth force*, both 1968 – the first of which lent the show its name.⁸ The exhibition was a forceful and unambiguous statement by the art establishment on a new Australian avant-garde, the proponents of which were placed at the centre of contemporary Australian art.⁹

Aspden embraced this spirit in his work. He experimented with shaped canvases, expanses of uniform colour and hard-edged geometric forms. The scale of his work increased dramatically, so that he often had to paint outside the studio with his unstretched canvases pinned to the wall. Despite the close similarities at this time between his work and that of many of his contemporaries in *The field* exhibition, certain key qualities were emerging that were to remain at the core of Aspden’s art: colour, the importance of place, and a fascination with formal relationships within an image. Above all, the contemporary idea of art as an experience – the autonomous art object having a direct relationship with the viewer, and their experience of the object being the aim of the work rather than the expression of an external idea – became a defining tenet of his paintings.

Writing late in his career on the occasion of a major survey exhibition at Orange Regional Gallery, Aspden emphasised the centrality of colour and music to his work, describing the synaesthetic relationship between them as the core of his practice.¹⁰ He refers to colour in musical terms – harmony, variation and discord – and associates it with nature and the landscape: ‘what are the colours of music? ... I am challenged by the colours that can be found in the air, wind and weather, as well as the more easily recognisable colours in the tangible world of nature’.¹¹ For Aspden, colour, music and landscape were intertwined; they were the muses that drove him and shaped his sensibility.

Aspden’s earliest paintings were landscapes, and his surroundings were integral to his work throughout his career.¹² It must be stressed, however, that his response to place was not mimetic but rather allusive and poetic. His work was suffused with the world around him: the dramatic movement of light and shadow over water and foliage or across canvas and paper, and the rhythms and syncopation of the jazz he loved to play in his studio. The stimulus of new environments and his tendency to immerse himself in a place gave his work fresh impetus, and the majority of his series were either in response to where he was living or to his travels.

Aspden responded directly to the landscapes he encountered on his travels – the cultivated countryside of rural England and France, the remote jungles of Papua New Guinea, the tropical Top End of Australia, the dry central Australian outback and even the cityscape of the densely built-up rooftops of Manhattan.

At the same time, Aspden conceived and created paintings as formal exercises, translating into paint a germinating idea or sensation. He responded to colour in an emotional way¹³ and commented in 1965 that ‘the important things are the relationships between things, not the things themselves’, a sentiment he subscribed to all his life.¹⁴ Positive and negative space – or shapes and the spaces between them – coupled with his dynamic contrasts of colour and tone were energising forces in his imagery.

His application of paint could be experimental, using tools such as rollers or making collages from randomly torn shapes. The rigid linearity of his short-lived but seminal hard-edge phase was replaced by a gestural, vigorous and instinctive approach to mark-making, creating an organic abstraction through more painterly work that revealed the artist’s hand in its making. One motif in particular that prompted the dissolution of his picture plane was the floating ‘torn shape’ (a description coined by Daniel Thomas about Aspden’s process) that first appeared in his 1965 exhibition at Watters Gallery and to which he returned over the years in various manifestations.¹⁵

On his return to Australia Aspden began making work that referenced Indigenous Australian and Oceanic art, predominantly through its visual and aesthetic qualities rather than through any deep understanding of its cultural significance to its makers. The distinctive landscapes, light and local Indigenous cultures Aspden experienced on travels to the Northern Territory, Queensland and New Caledonia continued to inspire his work into the 1990s, with Aspden describing his major painting *Black music* 1995 (in the collection of the Art Gallery of New South Wales) as ‘referring to Aboriginal sounds’, although this again reflected a purely personal response.¹⁶

* *David Aspden: the colour of music and place* by Anne Ryan with Helen Campbell, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, 2011

NOTES

1. See John McDonald, 'Finding refuge in the landscape', *Sydney Morning Herald, Spectrum*, 15–16 May 2010, pp 14–15
2. Aspden quoted in Mervyn Horton (ed), *Present day art in Australia*, Ure Smith, Sydney 1969, p 15
3. Aspden discusses this in some detail in a 1970 interview with Hazel de Berg. See David Aspden interviewed by Hazel de Berg, 11 Feb 1970, sound recording, Hazel de Berg Collection, National Library of Australia, Canberra, ORAL TRC 1/457
4. *Contemporary American painting: a selection from the James A Michener Foundation Collection*, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, 22 Apr – 20 May 1964 (and touring); *Two decades of American painting*, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, 26 July – 20 Aug 1967 (and touring)
5. For example, see Elwyn Lynn, 'The travelling exhibition of selected paintings from the James A Michener Foundation Collection', *Art and Australia*, vol 2, no 3, Dec 1964, pp 204–09. The 1964 exhibition was selected from the collection of novelist James A Michener. While the catalogue was not illustrated, many of the works in the show were subsequently donated by Michener to the Blanton Museum of Art at the University of Texas at Austin, where they remain. The exhibition included work by such artists as Morris Louis and Theodoros Stamos that can be seen to presage developments in Aspden's oeuvre in the following decade. Aspden acknowledged Louis as an influence in his 1970 interview with Hazel de Berg (see note 3). Similarly, the 1967 exhibition, *Two decades of American painting*, selected from a number of collections by Waldo Rasmussen of the Museum of Modern Art in New York, included paintings by Morris Louis, Sam Francis, Kenneth Noland, Gene Davis and Clyfford Still, among others, that were incontrovertibly influential on Aspden's development. For a detailed analysis of Aspden's paintings during this period, including his response to the work of Louis and Noland in particular, see Terry Smith, 'The painting of David Aspden', *Art International*, vol xiv/8, 20 Oct 1970, pp 50–53, p 79
6. For example: Fred Martin, 'The art of the West Coast of the United States', *Art and Australia*, vol 1, no 2, Aug 1963, pp 84–90; Lynn 1964; Clement Meadmore, 'New York scene II – colour as an idiom', *Art and Australia*, vol 3, no 4, winter 1966, pp 289–91; and Elwyn Lynn, 'Clement Greenberg sees Australia', *Art and Australia*, vol 6, no 2, Sept 1968, pp 150–52. Each of these articles illustrate works that have parallels with developments in Aspden's oeuvre
7. See Christopher Heathcote, 'Arrogant purpose', *A quiet revolution: the rise of Australian art 1946–1968*, Text Publishing, Melbourne 1995, pp 184–92
8. See Patrick McCaughey, 'Introduction', *The field*, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne 1968
9. A number of artists in the exhibition who had studied overseas were influential, including James Doolin, an American expatriate who was active in Melbourne in the mid 1960s, and Sydney Ball, an Australian artist who studied at the Art & Students League in New York in the 1960s where he met many central figures, including Greenberg and the artists Mark Rothko, Willem de Kooning and Robert Motherwell, among others. See Anne Loxley, *Sydney Ball: the colour paintings 1963–2007*, Penrith Regional Gallery & The Lewers Bequest, Penrith, NSW 2009. In Sydney there were also a number of supportive commercial galleries, most notably Central Street Gallery and Gallery A. However, very few artists in the exhibition, including Aspden, retained a total commitment to the austere aesthetics of *The field*. For a brief history of the period, see Christopher Heathcote, 'A cool breed', in *A quiet revolution*, pp 184–92. See also Patrick McCaughey, *The bright shapes and the true names: a memoir*, Text Publishing, Melbourne 2003, pp 89–90
10. David Aspden, 'Artist's statement', in *David Aspden: celebration of colour*, Orange Regional Gallery, Orange, NSW 2002, np
11. Aspden 2002
12. 'My work, no matter how geometric it appeared to be ... has always been oriented to some aspect of landscape.' Aspden quoted in a 1979 interview with James Gleeson. See James Gleeson interviews: David Aspden, 28 May 1979, sound recording, National Gallery of Australia Archives, Canberra
13. 'I'm more interested in the purely emotional aspect of colour than the structural thing...' Aspden quoted in McGregor 1969, p 192. James Gleeson also noted this, writing that Aspden had moved 'from a characteristically mid-sixties view of colour as a kind of aesthetics laboratory to the older, more romantic and more universal view of colour as an agent of emotion'. See James Gleeson, 'When colours began to meet in an embrace...', *Sun-Herald* (Sydney), 15 Oct 1972
14. David Aspden interviewed by Hazel de Berg, 20 Nov 1965, sound recording, Hazel de Berg Collection, National Library of Australia, Canberra, ORAL TRC 1/143
15. Daniel Thomas, '... he is a good colorist who makes abstracts – some with sea and shore titles – out of large torn shapes', in 'This show's got everything!', *Sunday Telegraph* (Sydney), 13 June 1965
16. Handwritten notes by Aspden on the works in the Orange exhibition, AGNSW research files

ISSUES FOR CONSIDERATION

David Aspden was sustained by three central inspirations – colour, music and place. His practice was described as an act of immersion – a way of creating an all-encompassing colour environment.

- Describe your immediate response to the four works in this resource. Consider the scale, composition, colour selection and imagery. Do you feel a strong connection or *immersion* into the work? How has the artist achieved this?
- As a ‘composer of paintings’ consider the way Aspden may have worked in his studio. How did he create an all encompassing colour environment. Describe the scene – the music playing, the objects in the room, the images on the wall, the books on the shelves etc.
- Aspden was interested in art from many periods and curious about the work of others. Henri Matisse was a significant favourite. Research the work of Matisse, in particular his approach to colour and use of collage. Compare examples of his work with Aspden’s *Coast II* 1978. Describe Aspden’s use of the ‘torn shape’ and compare this method with Matisse’s paper cutouts.

‘The Sydney art scene in the 1960s had an indelible impact on Aspden.’ Curator Anne Ryan, 2011

- Research the development of post-painterly abstraction in the 1960s. In particular, investigate the influence of art critic Clement Greenberg. Select one artist from this movement and discuss the structure and composition of their work. How does it compare to David Aspden’s early works? Select examples from each artist and discuss the similarities and differences.
- Research information on *The field* exhibition held at the National Gallery of Victoria in 1968. List the artists involved and create a presentation highlighting works from the exhibition. Describe the impact this exhibition had on the Australian art scene at the time, as well as the influence it has had on contemporary Australian art.
- *Tackling THE FIELD* at the Art Gallery of NSW in 2009 was in direct response to *The field* exhibition from 1968. With reference to the online catalogue, suggest the significance of creating an exhibition in 2009 based on an exhibition in the 1960s. Have the audiences of each time differed in response to these works? Debate why their opinions differ or are similar.

Aspden was interested in the contemporary notion that art was an experience – the viewer and their developing relationship with the art object was the aim of the work rather than the artwork being an expression of an external idea.

- How does this differ from the traditional role of artist, artwork and audience?
- In what way can viewers bring meaning to Aspden’s images? Discuss how specific associations, memories and experiences of an audience can affect the interpretation of an artwork?
- Look at the painting *Outer spice* 1969. Write down your immediate subjective response. How does the artist draw you into the composition? Discuss your observations and interpretation of the work with the class.

‘Positive and negative spaces – shapes and the spaces between them – coupled with his dynamic contrasts of colour and tone were energising forces in his imagery.’ Anne Ryan 2011

- Aspden responded to colour in an emotional way. Select two works and record the way the artist arranges the visual elements within it. Describe the effect and create a list of words to express your response to Aspden’s use of colour. Is his palette harmonious and tonal, or jarring and discordant?
- Consider the use of shape in the works you have selected. Are the artworks structured or unstructured? Is the process conscious or random and open to chance? Compare Aspden’s early hard-edge works with his later, more gestural and instinctive approach to mark making. Discuss how you feel the compositions have evolved over time.

Investigate the use and importance of music in Aspden’s work and life. Consider the example *Black music* 1995.

- Describe the music you imagine when you view this artwork. Using musical terms (for example harmony, variation, discord) create a descriptive text to accompany the work.
- Research other artists who have used music as an inspiration to their practice (for example Wassily Kandinsky, Roy de Maistre, Olive Cotton). Select two examples of their work and describe the type of music you hear when you view the images.

‘His response to place was not mimetic, but rather allusive and poetic.’ Anne Ryan 2011

- Consider the meaning of this statement. Describe the elements in Aspden’s practice that could be considered allusive and poetic. List the countries that Aspden visited in his travels. Investigate the impact travel had on his art making. View the work *Canal Street* 1980. What qualities in this work reflect the stimulus of the environment?

SOURCES AND FURTHER READING

Books

Heathcote, Christopher. *A quiet revolution: the rise of Australian art 1946–1968*, Text Publishing, Melbourne 1995

Horton, Mervyn (ed). *Present day in Australia*, Ure Smith, Sydney 1969

Exhibition catalogues

Ryan, Anne with Campbell, Helen. *David Aspden: the colour of music and place* Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney 2011

Lynn, Elwyn et al. *The Field*, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne 1968

For further resources, information and programs related to David Aspden and his work see:

Art Gallery of NSW, Sydney
www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au

Tackling THE FIELD online catalogue
www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/education/materials/online_catalogues

David Aspden website, 2005
ceramics.net.au/david/indexv2.htm

Newspapers, periodicals and magazines

McDonald, John. 'Finding refuge in the landscape', *Sydney Morning Herald, Spectrum*, 15–16 May 2010

Film

Ten Australians: David Aspden, video recording, Sydney 1975. Australian Broadcasting Commission/ Visual Arts Board of the Australia Council co-production, producer/director Dale McCreia

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