BIRTH OF THE COOL
DAVID ASPDEN
SYDNEY BALL
MICHAEL JOHNSON
DICK WATKINS
Noela Yuill witnessed the arrival and spread of ‘the new abstraction’ in Australia at extremely close quarters. She was friendly with some of the earliest exponents, and had a succession of involvements with the Contemporary Art Society, the Central Street Gallery, the Hargrave Street (Chandler Coventry) Gallery, and the fledgling Visual Arts Board of the Australia Council. This made her an eye-witness (admittedly a Sydney-centric one) of much of what was happening over the period of 1963–1973. She remembers being struck by something the American critic Clement Greenberg said during a lecture he gave at the University of Sydney in 1968. Greenberg had remarked that artists working in solitude in far-flung places, quite unbeknown to each other, could be working on parallel courses – dealing with similar creative issues, referring to identical sources and inspirations, setting themselves challenges which to all intents and purposes were the same. This resounded for Noela Yuill. It was something she repeatedly observed during the implantation of the new abstraction in Australia.

Take the case of two Australians, Sydney Ball and Dick Watkins. In 1963 Ball was a student at the Art Students League in New York, where his teachers included one of ‘the Irascibles’, Theodoros Stamos, and where he enjoyed a day-to-day rapport with the Manhattan art scene then in its halcyon days. His first one-man-show at the Westerley Gallery in 1964 was mentioned (non-commitally, it is true) in a review by Donald Judd no less. On the other side of the world, Dick Watkins’ studio was in the boiler-room of an apartment building in McMahon’s Point, Sydney. He was living in the afterglow of three years in London (1959–1961) and with travel memories of Paris, Madrid and New York. He sensed that the interests he was exploring were untranslatable into the local art scene and felt as isolated from it as could be. This did nothing to quell the daring of his speculations nor the courage of his convictions, as was revealed in sporadic exhibits with the Contemporary Art Society and in his first one-man-show held at Barry Stern’s Gallery in Sydney in 1963.
Ball and Watkins – without any contact or knowledge of each other – painted in the same year what could be taken as two variations of the same painting. In fact both works could be adduced as the earliest surviving hard-edge or colour-field paintings ever produced by an Australian artist.

Both paintings are symmetrical in organisation, with a vertical band placed dead centre, flanked by another two bands of contrasting colour. Watkins’ painting (untitled, not in this exhibition) was done on Masonite, painted in glossy household enamel. The vertical divisions are defined by narrow timber slats projecting at ninety degrees from the picture plane. His work (and Sydney Ball’s too) is not very big – the size of a moderately large easel-painting, yet it has been handled more like an object than a picture. It is conspicuously straight-forward and artisanal in construction – deliberately ‘inartistic’ and ‘impersonal’, in other words. The central stripe is green, the colour-field duck-egg blue, and the flanking bands are grey-cream rimmed with red. Despite – or maybe because of – its simplicity and literalness, Watkins’ painting has an astonishing impact. It is still a knock-out more than fifty years after its creation yet it has never appeared in any history of Australian art. Why is this so?
With Sydney Ball’s 1963 work, *Kingoonyah* – a lone survivor from his New York *Band Series* (1963–64) – the materials are more traditional and respectable (high-quality oil on canvas) and the red and yellow ochres that predominate do not smack of pure artifice (as is the case with Watkins). The painting’s title refers to a small town in the far-north of Ball’s home state of South Australia. Ruddy earth-colours, the eventless zones and emptied-out, flattened pictorial space have a pretext or an echo in the desert landscape. Ball recounted to Anne Loxley how, during a criticism session at the Art Students’ League, Theodoros Stamos had turned one of Ball’s landscapes on its side: ‘Just putting it on its side was a total change of what it could be. I thought that was much more interesting. That’s where the *Bands* developed,’ he remembered.

The mystery of synchronicity lessens as soon as we realise that there is a single archetype hovering behind the paintings by Watkins and Ball: their formats recall the American painter Barnett Newman, who was an antecedent for so much hard-edge, minimalist and colour-field painting during the 1960s. Newman was famous for creating large resonant colour-fields interrupted by one or more vertical bands or narrow stripes (which he called ‘zips’). For younger artists coming to maturity at the time, Newman’s paintings were object-lessons because of the commanding effects that could be achieved with colour when it was apportioned in perfect ratios, was perfectly pitched, and was amplified to precisely the right scale. Newman placed an intense focus on the physical, formal, architectonic aspects of painting, yet the titles he chose for his works – and in his writings and conversation – he sought to shift the emphasis to their emotional, symbolic, metaphysical and mythopoeic implications. Newman associated his art to the aesthetic category of the ‘sublime’.

One etymology links the word ‘sublime’ to the Latin *limen*, meaning ‘a threshold’. This etymology is doubted by some Latinists, yet it is extremely relevant to Newman. The idea of a threshold, the characterisation of the encounter with a work of art as a ‘threshold experience’, and the cognate term *sublimation* used in alchemy (sublimation being, amongst other things, the transmutation of matter into light, substance into spirit, quantity into quality) could explain something of the powerful charisma exercised by Newman’s art and ideas.

While the new abstractionists generally chose to ignore or play-down the spiritualist, symbolist aspects of Barnett Newman’s work, his metaphor of the threshold remained fertile for them. In Sydney Ball’s case, as we have noted, there was an effortless shift from a ‘Barnett Newman’ schema into a reminiscence of the South Australian desert, and vice versa. Likewise, in the post- and-lintel vernacular of Michael Johnson’s modular paintings from 1968–69 (two examples in this exhibition) there could be an allusion to “doorways, Stonehenge, looking out into the night”, as Johnson noted in an interview.

In this regard, Daniel Thomas has ventured that Johnson’s paintings were “not windows on to an actual view, but windows on to something ‘other’, something outside of oneself, a glimpse of the unknown.” Might something similar be said of Ball’s *Canto* series (1964–1967), where the circular motif alludes to portals in Chinese and Japanese garden architecture called ‘moongates’? It also alludes to ‘the Chinese symbol for infinity’. In addition, we should acknowledge Ball’s long-standing interest in Buddhist and Shinto shrines. Then there is a series entitled *Window* that David Aspden exhibited in 1966 – among them *Window IV* in the collection of the National Gallery of Australia, included in this exhibition – where the title invites us to peer into the colour-field, to see the purple expanse as space. Conversely, the sequence of purple, magenta, lime green and cadmium red around the edges appears to be emanating from the centre. The aggregate of colours creates its own light, filling the image from edge to edge, with the fierce energy of the interaction of colours propelling the image towards the viewer.
“In New York I saw artists like Barnett Newman,” Sydney Ball reminisced, “in whose work the large field wasn’t just contained within the parameters of the rectangle, it expanded out. I still like that expansion attitude. Jackson Pollock had it and the other great exponent of course was Claude Monet.” In London between 1960 and 1967, Michael Johnson was strongly attracted to the expansive behaviour of Matisse’s *The Snail* at the Tate, as well as the large-scale American paintings he was seeing. He was floored by the great Rothko exhibition at the Whitechapel Gallery in 1961: “I just couldn’t believe it, the breathy where-is-it on the skin of your eyes tactile atmospherics of under-and-over,” he told Barry Pearce.
Young Australian artists in London in the early 1960s (Watkins, Johnson, Whiteley, Wendy Paramor, Tony McGillick, Royston Harper, Peter Upward, Vernon Treweeke, Rollin Schlicht among them) were living through momentous times: “I recall being in a state of complete overstimulation,” Johnson recalled. “It’s as if this city at this moment opened the doors to the studios of the world.” Inspired by the great exhibitions he was seeing, Johnson’s work, like Sydney Ball’s in 1962–63, was in transition from figurative painting to the new abstraction. One work he produced in 1962 was a landscape 3.6 metres wide, entitled In the Beginning. “When I saw American art I discovered scale,” Johnson told Barry Pearce. “I realised that you had to go big to create impact with colour. A spot of red on a dirty grey is all very well in a Sickert, or a yellow highlight on a sleeve in Sargent, but it was not enough for an artist in the sixties.”
Emboldened by this realisation, he painted *Anna*, 218cm by 415cm, a work on view for the first time since it was shown in Johnson’s one-man exhibition at Central Street Gallery in 1967. The dating of *Anna* is open to dispute: the back of the canvas bears a date of 1962 and stylistically it resembles other works of Johnson’s from this time, however in Barry Pearce’s monograph on Johnson it is assigned to 1965. Johnson’s daughter Anna – after whom the painting was named – was born in 1966. In a spirit of compromise we could set *Anna* alongside the breakthrough works by Watkins and Ball and ascribe a date to it of ‘circa 1963’.

In the fateful year of 1963 David Aspden also showed transitional paintings – landscapes phasing into abstraction – in an exhibition he held in Wollongong. However, abstraction and ‘the new abstraction’ were not one and the same thing. Aspden’s first-hand encounter with the new abstraction had to wait till 1964, when he saw Kenneth Noland’s *Split Spectrum* and a painting by Morris Louis in the *James A. Michener Travelling Exhibition* touring Australia. Unlike Watkins, Ball and Johnson, Aspden’s experience of postwar American painting was severely limited, based mostly on reproductions in art magazines, although homegrown versions of the new abstraction were beginning to appear in galleries in Sydney and Melbourne. In 1965 Aspden exhibited his first fully-fledged colour-field paintings in a one-man show at Watters Gallery.

The following year, in his second Watters show, there were several variants of the ‘Barnett Newman’ archetype. In a review of the latter exhibition, Elwyn Lynn called Aspden an ‘icon-abstractionist whose glowing images are self-sufficient, single presences’ – a description worth lingering over, because the words ‘icon’, ‘glowing’, ‘single’ and ‘self-sufficient’ are full of implication, and can be applied generally to the works by all four artists during this era.

“The problem as I see it is how to use colour in the most vibrant combinations. I think colour is the most exciting element in painting today.” – Dick Watkins

“It wasn’t until getting to New York [in 1963] and seeing solo exhibitions, especially at the Museum of Modern Art, that I wanted to eliminate the peripheral marks and concentrate on colour itself.” – Sydney Ball

“For me, my painting is first an event or process rather than a mere object ... my intention being to envelop the viewer in a structure of colour forces. To allow the colour to act, I try to free it from drawing as much as possible.” – David Aspden

“Colour in nature is dictated by light and colour in art is arranged by the mind.”
– Michael Johnson

How does a painter raise the experience of colour to maximum intensity? The answer is not as simple as some might assume. Legions of modern artists – from the time of Manet, Whistler and the Impressionists onwards – have tackled this question, as have psychologists of perception, aesthetic philosophers, art teachers and art critics. In the 1910s some of the earliest artists who embraced abstraction believed they were doing so in order to liberate colour, to give it autonomy as a constructive element in painting.

“We have a very real medium, colour,” declared Robert Delaunay, whose earliest abstract works date from around 1912. “But despite thousands of years of the art of painting, we are at the beginning in terms of the awareness of our craft, which no longer arises from a story to tell, from an object to copy, to reproduce or deform. We are back with ourselves and our brushes.
The fact of painting is, for us, to reveal our consciousness, to become aware of the elements that constitute this act. It is this way we learn, like children, the constructive language of colour.”

František Kupka, another pioneer of abstract art who began producing abstract paintings at about the same time as Delaunay, mocked the “poor painters who are obliged to steal costumes from the actors’ dressing rooms to scatter some touches of bold colour onto your canvases” – admonishing them for being too outer-directed and out-of-touch with their passions: “You have forgotten that the sense of colours is found in yourselves, that you have to seek it out!”

Their euphoric anticipation of untold creative possibilities connects the new abstractionists in the 1960s to the pioneers of abstraction in the 1910s. Colour was taken up once again as a vehicle of sensation and passion, as a conduit of affect linking the artist and the viewer, and as grist for the imagination and intellect.

Yet the question remained: how to make optimal use of colour. Hermann von Helmholtz’s Treatise on physiological optics (1910) had noted that “the weakening of form increases colour interaction” – an effect that finds corroboration in the paintings of Whistler and Rothko, for example, and is a justification (if justification is needed) for David Aspden’s initiative to “free colour from drawing as much as possible.” Anton Ehrenzweig’s classic The Hidden Order of Art (1967) benefited from the author’s acquaintance with the new abstraction in the 1960s. In this book Ehrenzweig stated categorically that “a strong composition inhibits the mutual enhancement of colour surfaces … conversely the mutual enhancement of colours tends to weaken form and tonal contrasts, the relation between figure and ground and illusions of depth produced by perspective.”
Sydney BALL, *Canto no XXX*, 1966, synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 201.2 x 181.0 cm
Collection: Art Gallery of New South Wales. On loan from the estate of Elwyn Lynn
Barnett Newman, Mark Rothko, Ellsworth Kelly, Frank Stella, the four painters in the exhibition, and others who shared their concerns arrived at similar conclusions by trial and error in their studio practice. Tonal contrasts, figure/ground relationships, the illusions of depth produced by perspective are liable to be overwhelmed by the foregrounding of colour: and if left unchecked, the former will distract from the experience of the latter, robbing colour of its intensity.

Barnett Newman was a key reference for the artists of the 1960s, as we have already noted. He distinguished his approach from Mondrian’s (and from European painting generally) by conceiving the canvas as a whole from the very beginning, eschewing the tinkering of part-to-part and part-to-whole that is typical of the European way of composing. Unlike pictures with complex, intricate internal relationships (‘relational’ painting), Newman’s colour fields are unitary, holistic, ‘non-relational’. There is a simple lesson to be learnt from them: how much better colour is served when the image doesn’t recede illusionistically behind a frame and is coextensive with the surface and shape of the support.

What appeared at first to be an untenable limitation in actuality gave rise to an abundance of invention. Myriad changes were rung on the ‘non-relational’ and ‘holistic’ premise, which eventually went by a myriad of names: minimalism, primary structures, deductive structures, monochrome painting, shaped canvases, systemic painting, modular painting, surface/support, hard-edge painting, colour-form painting, post-painterly abstraction... None of this terminology need concern us unduly here, although some of those terms were applied specifically to the emblematic, compressed images we see in the current exhibition.

Typical examples of the new abstract painting were legible in the blink of an eye. Artists reduced the time it takes for a viewer to assimilate an image by revoking pictorial depth or by making it indeterminate. The American painter Kenneth Noland coined the term ‘one-shot’ painting – meaning that his paintings could be apprehended in their entirety in a split second. To this effect heraldry, flags, commercial signage, road signs and religious icons were all pre-existing examples of ‘one-shot’ images – as was a lot of earlier modern art. ‘One-shot’ was the sixties version of what the Impressionists had called ‘instantaneity’ and the Orphists ‘simultaneity’. The pared-down geometries of the Bauhaus and Russian constructivism gained a new authority in the 1960s and Matisse’s lifetime achievement was more widely appreciated than ever before.

Central Street Gallery was a hub of the new abstraction in Sydney. A note in a 1967 exhibition catalogue (written by artist/director Tony McGillick) defined the conventions of the Central Street painters (or some of the painters at least): “There is generally a preference for flat picture space and two-dimensionality, a non-tactile, non-gestural technique and a conceptual approach to composition which allows little room for schematic revision after the decisions have reached the canvas.”

Stated this way, it all sounds rather grim: ascetic, cerebral, hidebound and very, very arid. However those strictures say nothing at all about the spirit of the art, which exulted in its contrariness and paradoxicality, flouting the rules and revelling in the power of colour. Indeed, the spirit of the art can be seen as diametrically opposite to this formulation: it was confident, extrovert, open, engaging, playful, pleasurable, euphoric, stylish, poetic... and driven by a thirst for freedom. It should be a cause for wonder that, fifty years on, we are able to take stock of how enduringly characterful, compelling and mesmerisingly beautiful the best of these paintings are.
Dick Watkins was a mainstay of the Central Street Gallery and was the only artist accorded a retrospective exhibition there. Yet six or seven years before his retrospective, when Watkins began exhibiting in Sydney, the inconsistency of his work tended to raise eyebrows. Three paintings he submitted to the Helena Rubenstein prize in November 1963 were in deliberately different styles. In his memoir of Central Street, Paul McGillick tells us how Watkins, in each of his shows, would always include a couple of works in flagrant contrast with the rest “to offset critical complacency.”

Watkins’ painting, *Turn* 1965, was purchased by the Art Gallery of New South Wales in 1966 and was the first colour-field painting to enter the collection. There is a letter from Watkins in the curator’s files concerning this work: “*Turn* ... was an attempt to have my cake (simplicity) and eat it too (complexity, content) or something. It has a connection obviously with the best American painting (P.P.A.) [i.e. Post-Painterly Abstraction] but not with the critical dogmas that surround that ‘school’.”
David Aspden, too, would have bucked at aspects of Tony McGillick’s definition of the ‘Central Street’ pictorial conventions in 1965 – ‘flat picture space’ wasn’t something he ever sought, he told James Gleeson: “I was really interested in development of space as colour, not just colour.” Syd Ball, of course had nothing to do with the Central Street Gallery, even if something of the ethos of his work might have fitted in with Tony McGillick’s formula.

Nevertheless the accusation has been made repeatedly that ‘Central Street painting’ was prescriptive and doctrinaire, that its adherents were conformists and dupes, that the work they produced was all somehow ‘the same’. Richard Haese, in his book Permanent Revolution: Mike Brown and the Australian Avant-garde, hasn’t a good word to say for any of the Central Street artists and condemns outright “the circumscribed and puritanical imperatives of the new abstraction.” Is this comment fair? With all due deference to the eminent historian of Australian art, is his allegation tenable in regard to the works in this exhibition?

“Local commentators have turned the new gallery into a wailing wall.”
– Elwyn Lynn (on the critical reception of The Field exhibition at the National Gallery of Victoria, The Bulletin, 7 September 1968)

The newspaper critics’ responses to the new abstraction were initially quite mixed, but there was no sign of the violent polarisation that would prevail later on. Some critics were less than delighted by what they saw – they made that patently clear – yet were condescending towards the youth of the artists, tolerant of their desire to experiment, and condoning of their attraction to novelty (these being the necessary evils of modern art). However there was a handful of enthusiastic partisans from the very beginning, Daniel Thomas being exemplary in this regard.

“One welcomes abstraction that is really abstract, that seeks full logical conclusions instead of landscape-and-figure compromises,” he wrote in a review of Dick Watkins’ first one-man-show, noting in addition “the indignation it is causing: ‘only design, only exercises’.” (Sunday Telegraph, October 1963)

The indignation did not lessen or go away. It mounted to a fever pitch five years later in response to The Field, an exhibition generally considered to be the Australian apotheosis of the new abstraction. Aspden, Ball, Johnson and Watkins participated in The Field with two works apiece, alongside 35 other artists. The exponents of the new abstraction were now numerous and scattered across the major cities of Australia. The evidence of their ubiquity seemed to meet with the approval of the National Gallery of Victoria and the Art Gallery of New South Wales, not to mention the boosters among the critics and dealers.

However, to the old guard in Sydney and Melbourne The Field looked like a juggernaut, a beat-up, a palace revolution. “The ‘New’ Abstraction Takes Over” yelped the headline of a review by James Gleeson, while Allan McCulloch took the Director of the newly reopened National Gallery of Victoria to task for his irresponsibility and poor judgment in presenting The Field, “a most unfortunate choice for such an occasion.” McCulloch described the contents of the exhibition (admitting that he hadn’t yet seen it) as “a large-scale imitation of American geometric hard-edge abstracts,” none of which “reflects some aspect of the Australian environment.” Sight unseen, the art was without interest, devoid of quality and corrupting to Australian values – that was the gist of the message to his readers.
Dick WATKINS, *Mickey Mouse*, 1968, synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 131.0 x 127.0 cm
Journalists found expert support for their incredulity and malice from the dealer Rudy Komon ("I have seen exactly the same paintings in New York in 1964") and the artist Leonard French ("Its content is nil"). Some of the participating artists didn’t regard the exhibition as a career highlight by any means, being distinctly put-out by the psychological overcrowding and levelling effect of the presentation – David Aspden for instance: “The Field? It’s already happened, it’s nearly finished. They were looking under stones for them at Alice Springs.” In a recently published book, Richard Haese cites (approvingly) Albert Tucker’s contribution to a public discussion about the new abstraction:

“International style is an example of the old con game. Actually, it is one of the most concentrated forms of regional art. Manhattan regionalism comes from a small island off the American coast … Don’t get me wrong. I like America. And I like Manhattan regionalism. But the things that are valid in Manhattan have no necessary validity here.”

In fact Tucker’s interlocutor in the discussion was the critic Laurie Thomas, who wrote one of the most interesting reviews of _The Field_ (Sydney Morning Herald, 7 November 1968). This could perhaps be compared to the much-quoted article by Louis Leroy regarding the first Impressionist exhibition, although it didn’t have Leroy’s satirical intent – however it gives a very clear rundown of what most disconcerted and antagonised the art establishment.

“These are the works of students – art school exercises made with set squares, compasses and hacksaws. Most either have been or could be done as well by any competent ad-man, sign-writer, poster artist, industrial designer, carpenter or engineering student,” wrote Thomas.

It was a bogus avant-garde, he continued, because it was perpetrated by conformists, bandwagonners and Johnny-come-latelies: “As an avant-garde it is now only a cliché.” Most damningly, the new abstraction was un-Australian: “Any sign of nationalism is parochial and despised.”

A closer look at his objections is illuminating. Regarding the artists’ youthfulness and alleged inexperience (“these are the works of students”) – we could point out that Laurie Thomas was born in 1915 and was 53 years old in 1968, James Gleeson was the same age, and Allan McCulloch 61, whereas sixteen of the artists in _The Field_ were under 30 (Robert Hunter, at 20, being the youngest). The majority of the artists in _The Field_ were in their early 30s. There was a generation gap which had created differences so deep, it seemed that there were two worlds in collision.

Sydney Ball was born in 1933, David Aspden in 1935, Dick Watkins in 1937, and Michael Johnson in 1938. They belonged to a generation which had reached adulthood in the post-World War II decades, benefiting from the rising affluence, aware of the altered geo-politics, shunning the bleakness, pathos and angst they associated with the 1950s, the War and the Depression. They were drawn into a collective re-examination of the radical modern art from the earlier part of the twentieth century – an interest evidenced by the choice of titles for their works, paying homage to Ezra Pound’s _Cantos_, to Meyerhold’s Russian theatre, to Edmund Wilson’s _Axel’s Castle_ and much besides. Inspired by this mind-expanding legacy, they committed their best efforts to the resurgent modernism of the day.
A great survey (54–64 – *Painting and Sculpture of a Decade*) held at the Tate Gallery in London had focussed on the post-War resurgence of modernism, and there is a passage in the exhibition’s catalogue essay expressing the great hope of the time:

“Some pioneers who laboured through the first half of the century in a tragically small minority came to fear that modern art must fail because the people were not with it. Conceivably they spoke too soon. The culture that has grown up in these last years has at least some of it the marks of a majority culture, the wide public, the confidence, some of the rewards.”
One decisive step taken in the direction of the majority culture was the adoption of the Bauhaus’s pedagogy in many art schools in the US and the UK. Basic Design courses began to be taught in art schools in England in the 1950s and became entrenched there as a result of the Coldstream report in 1960. The period style of the 1960s – the style pervading the art, fashion, graphics and architecture – had a common root in Basic Design, which was obligatory in an art student’s training. The design sensibility that had been instilled in the rising generation was one of the things that made them seem so alien to their elders.

Competency in Basic Design could equip a young artist for gainful employment and could also persuade successful designers and architects to try their hand at painting and sculpture. Michael Johnson found work as a graphic designer in various advertising agencies (as did Tony McGillick, John White and Harald Norities, the prime movers of the Central Street Gallery.) Syd Ball was an accomplished graphic designer who produced posters and catalogues for his own exhibitions, as well as the poster for The Field. David Aspden had been apprenticed to a sign writer in Wollongong and acknowledged “lots of stripes and, later, jigsaw shapes that were straight out of sign painting” in his colour-field paintings.

Such associations with trade and commerce might offend or embarrass old-timers like Laurie Thomas. Yet, as everybody knows, the sixties saw a relaxation of class distinctions. Some of the boosters of The Field were more than happy to associate the new art with ‘levelling’, anti-elitism, youthfulness, internationalism and popular culture. The comparison of hard-edge abstraction with the work of an ‘ad-man, sign-writer or carpenter’ was not nearly as offensive as was the intent behind it. Indeed, Michael Johnson has enumerated the advantages brought to his art by his experience as a labourer in the building industry: ‘awareness of the module’, ‘not having to paint up to a neighbouring colour’, ‘knowing the tension of the wall’, etc. Hadn’t the great Henri Matisse himself once confessed to a hankering for ‘painting with bricks’?

Marshall McLuhan’s book Understanding Media was published in 1964. In it he sketched his famous theory of ‘cool’ and ‘hot’ media, and characterised the contemporary age as cool:

“The past mechanical time was hot, and we of the TV age are cool.” The transition from ‘the mechanical age’ to ‘the electric age’ had changed, and would continue to change the configurations of power in culture and politics, McLuhan argued. New media of communication were challenging ‘high’ or ‘serious’ culture, and perhaps the effect was most obvious in the visual arts. Abstract-expressionist painting in the 1940s was hot, whereas successive styles (Pop art, Post-Painterly abstraction, Minimalism) were cool. Bebop, the jazz style of the forties, was hot whereas modern jazz was cool. The turning point in the history of jazz had occurred between 1949 and 1950 when, under Miles Davis’s leadership, there was a series of recordings assembled into an LP in 1957 entitled Birth of the Cool.

In Melbourne the writer GR (Ross) Lansell located the artists of The Field within “these ‘global village’ times of ours” and explained that their commonality in style and attitude stemmed from their reaction against the ‘hot’ painting of the recent past: “It represents an emancipation from the expressionist turgidities,” he wrote.

“The over-forties in Australia seem now not so assured of their stance, while the incoming cool generation […] with their Marshall McLuhan equipage, have, by comparison, all the vigour, the adventurousness plus probably some of the incompleteness of youth.”
Although historians and cultural analysts in Australia were far from having their last word about ‘the tyranny of distance’ and ‘the provincialism problem’, and although the notion of Australian exceptionalism has proven all but ineradicable in the ideological construction of ‘Australian art’, alert and enterprising young artists in the 1960s obtained a view from the mountaintop, so to speak, of a reconfigured, more linked-in world. McLuhan’s book *Understanding Media* predicted what this world would be like:

“The older patterns of mechanical, one-way expansion from centers to margins is no longer relevant to our electric world. Electricity does not centralize, but decentralizes. It is like the difference between a railway system and an electric grid system: the one requires railheads and big urban centers. Electric power, equally available in the farmhouse and the Executive Suite, permits any place to be a center, and does not require large aggregations.”

On the 27th June 1967, the European Broadcasting Union harnessed four satellites orbiting the earth to transmit a live performance by the Beatles, accompanied by a studio orchestra of strings and brass, staged in front of small audience consisting of pop celebrities. Everyone took up the refrain of ‘All You Need Is Love’, waving placards of the slogan translated into a Babel of languages. The performance was transmitted simultaneously to 31 countries and watched by an estimated 400 million people. It was aired by the ABC at 5:22am Australian Eastern Standard Time – the first time a simultaneous broadcast had girdled the earth.
Sydney BALL, *Pawnee Summer*, 1973, synthetic polymer paint and enamel on cotton canvas, 213.7 x 213.7 cm
Acquired 1973 with the assistance of an Australian Government Grant through the Visual Arts Board of the Australia Council Trustees’ Prize (winning entry) Collection: Queensland Art Gallery
LIST OF WORKS

David ASPDEN

Window IV, 1966
synthetic polymer paint on canvas
177.5 x 151.0 cm
Collection: National Gallery of Australia, Canberra
Purchased 1969
© Karen Aspden/Licensed by Viscopy, 2015

Outer spice, 1969
synthetic polymer paint on canvas
152.4 x 244.0 x 2.8 cm
Collection: Art Gallery of New South Wales
Purchased with funds provided by an anonymous purchase fund for contemporary Australian art 1970
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Norfolk Five, c.1970
oil on canvas, 260.0 x 313.0 cm
Collection of Johnny Kahlbetzer, Sydney
© Karen Aspden/Licensed by Viscopy, 2015

Brazil no. 1, 1971
synthetic polymer paint on canvas
285.0 x 255.0 cm
Collection: National Gallery of Australia, Canberra
Purchased 1972
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Sydney BALL

Kingoonyah, 1963
oil on canvas
108.0 x 93.0 cm
Collection of William Ashton, NSW

Canto XII, 1965
synthetic polymer paint on canvas
151.5 x 127.0 cm
Private Collection

Canto no XXX, 1966
synthetic polymer paint on canvas
201.2 x 181.0 cm
Collection: Art Gallery of New South Wales
On loan from the estate of Elwyn Lynn

Reach, 1969
enamel on wood, acrylic on canvas diptych
180.0 x 230.0 cm each
University of South Australia Art Collection: The Sydney Ball Gift
Donated through the Australian Government’s Cultural Gifts Program by Sydney Ball

Pawnee Summer, 1973
synthetic polymer paint and enamel on cotton canvas
213.7 x 213.7 cm
Acquired 1973 with the assistance of an Australian Government Grant through the Visual Arts Board of the Australia Council
Trustees’ Prize (winning entry)
Collection: Queensland Art Gallery
Michael JOHNSON

Anna, 1962
acrylic on canvas
218.0 x 417.0 cm
Collection of Michael Johnson, Sydney
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Night, 1968
synthetic polymer paint on canvas
152.4 x 214.0 cm
Collection: Art Gallery of New South Wales – Purchased 1968
© Michael Johnson/Licensed by Viscopy, 2015

Frontal (Gentle 1), 1969
PVC and pigment on cotton duck
152.7 x 152.7 cm
Collection: National Gallery of Australia, Canberra. Purchased 1976
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Untitled (Westward wall), 1969
synthetic polymer paint on canvas
259.0 x 182.8 cm
The University of Melbourne Art Collection
Purchased 1971
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Dick WATKINS

Axel’s Castle, 1967
synthetic polymer paint on two canvases
244.0 x 244.0 cm
Collection: National Gallery of Australia, Canberra Purchased 1976
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Mickey Mouse, 1968
synthetic polymer paint on canvas
131.0 x 127.0 cm
Art Gallery of South Australia, A.R. Ragless Bequest Fund 1984
© Dick Watkins/Licensed by Viscopy, 2015

Untitled, 1968
synthetic polymer paint on canvas
180.0 x 155.0 cm
Private Collection, Canberra
© Dick Watkins/Licensed by Viscopy, 2015

Four, 1971
synthetic polymer paint on canvas
183.0 x 48.0 cm
The University of Melbourne Art Collection
Purchased 1971
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Birth of the Cool
17 July – 18 September 2015
Anne & Gordon Samstag Museum of Art
University of South Australia, Adelaide

6 November – 15 December 2015
Drill Hall Gallery, Australian National University, Canberra

Exhibition Curator: Terence Maloon

Anne & Gordon Samstag Museum of Art
University of South Australia
55 North Terrace, Adelaide, SA 5000

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Cover image: David ASPDEN (1935–2005), Outer spice (detail), 1969 synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 152.4 x 244.0 x 2.8 cm, Art Gallery of New South Wales. Purchased with funds provided by an anonymous purchase fund for contemporary Australian art 1970. Photograph AGNSW, © Karen Aspden, OA19.1970

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