

ART COLLECTOR

THE NATSIAA ISSUE

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SO FAR, SO GOOD

Art Collective WA was a unique proposition in 2013: a self-funded, not-for-profit gallery owned and operated by senior WA artists for themselves. It's now coming up to its tenth year in business.

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Felicity Johnston often ponders the conundrum posed by her wealthy home state. Western Australia produces the bulk of the nation's resources, yet the state suffers from a lack of investment in its visual artists, both locally and nationally. "I do see a lack of interest in Western Australian artists", says Johnston. "That's why our Collective was set up solely to represent established and senior Western Australian artists."

She's referring to Art Collective WA, a not-for-profit gallery business with a unique mission. In 2013, when she was asked to set it up as inaugural director-curator, she had just stepped away from curating the Cruthers Collection of Women's Art at the University of Western Australia. Johnston comes equipped with managerial and communications skills that were honed in former roles at the National Association for the Visual Arts, Australian Galleries and Savill Galleries in Sydney. Johnston also has prior experience running her own gallery in Perth more than a decade ago.

"At that time, a lot of the commercial galleries had closed due to lack of support and a generational change, as gallery owners became tired and traditional collectors filled

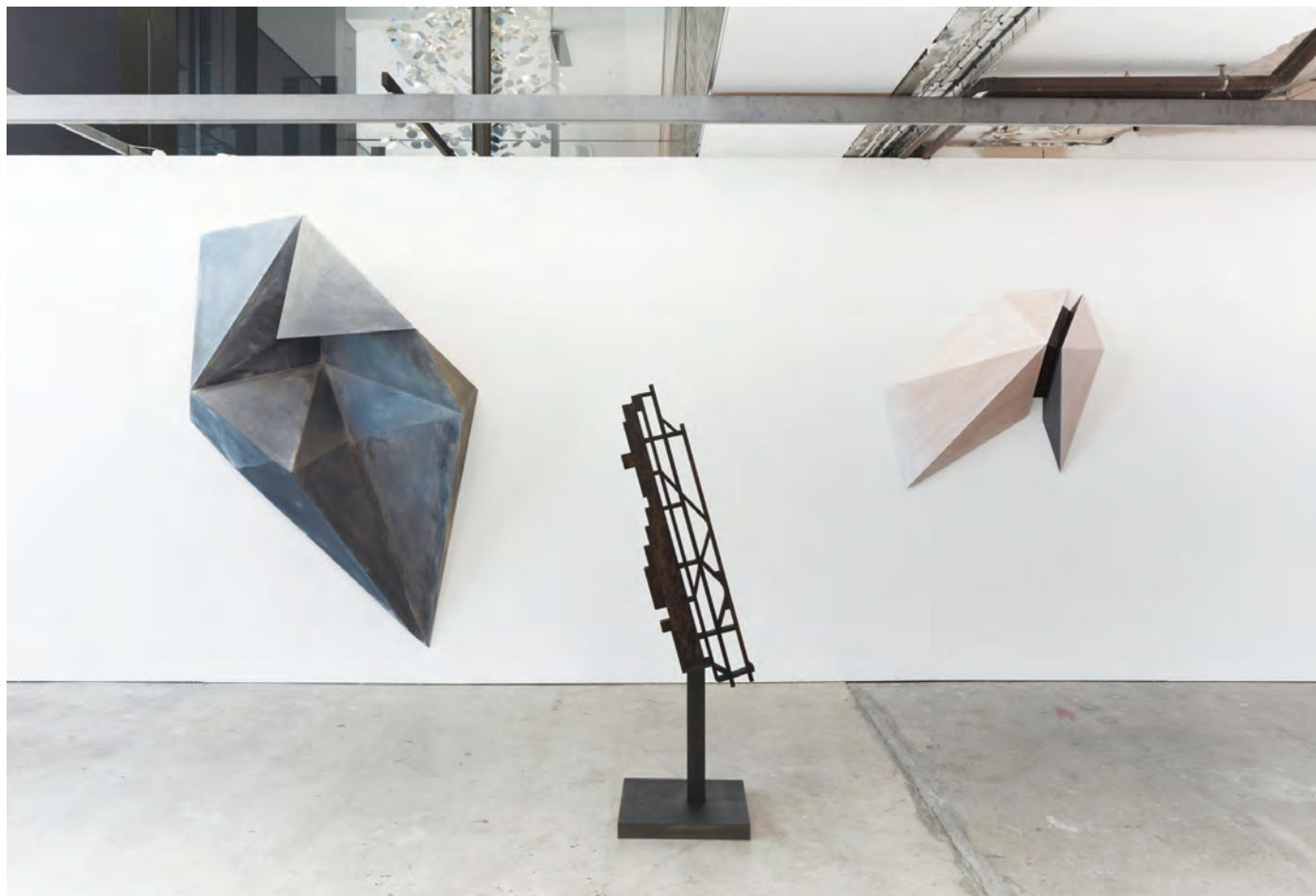
up their walls," she says. "The dialogue between artists disappeared because they had no places to meet and talk. So Art Collective WA was set up to fill that gap. We got together and decided on a not-for-profit model that was artist-owned; our board would exclusively consist of artists. It was important that established artists with long careers could be supported financially after they'd lost the ability to regularly show their work."

It's been a unique success story. Art Collective currently has 36 artist members; it has presented more than 200 artists in 134 exhibitions and sold more than 75 works to institutional collections. The long rollcall of artists includes **Trevor Vickers, Eveline Kotai, George Haynes, Angela Stewart, Alex Spremberg, Giles Hohnen, Merrick Belyea, Brad Rimmer** and **Vanessa Russ**.

On any day, Art Collective's light-filled gallery will be visited by one of its owner-members. The atmosphere is casual but keenly professional, the interior spaces small but imaginatively used. The exterior view is attractive – a grassy square bordered by St George's Cathedral and the historic State Buildings, Perth's bespoke hotel and award-winning restaurant complex.







ABOVE: Installation view of Jon Tarry's *One an-Other*, Art Collective WA, 2023.

OPPOSITE: Installation view of Kevin Robertson's *Recent Paintings*, Art Collective WA, 2023.

PHOTOS: ACORN PHOTO. COURTESY: THE ARTISTS AND ART COLLECTIVE WA, PERTH.

Johnston is proud that Art Collective WA has survived and thrived. She says 2020 was their best year, despite the Covid lockdown. “We had a captive audience that had disposable income. People weren’t spending three months overseas or going to Melbourne to buy work. And there was a resurgence in supporting local enterprises, which extended to ‘Let’s support our artists.’”

Art Collective WA is entirely self-funding, “although we occasionally apply for project funding,” she admits. “Because we’re solely owned by artists, we’ve always had the luxury of making decisions that weren’t financial. There are no accountants or lawyers telling

us we shouldn’t do a \$50,000 book or go to an expensive art fair.”

Art Collective WA has done both, producing high quality monographs of four West Australian artists, with a fifth due to be published about Haynes, one of WA’s most prolific living painters.

As for art fairs, the Collective was represented by 30 works in Sydney Contemporary in September. “We’ve been at the Sydney art fair every year since it started, and we will be displaying the work of **Joanna Lamb** at the Melbourne Art Fair next year,” says Johnston.

She says art patron **Janet Holmes à Court** is a great supporter, and Art Collective WA will



hold its ten-year anniversary show in October at Holmes à Court's private art gallery at Vasse Felix winery in Margaret River.

Art Collective WA has recorded 50 interviews with its artists. "It's to fill the lack of an archive of West Australian art history. There's nobody doing that work." It also holds regional exhibitions in Geraldton, Albany and Bunbury. "And each year, we invited a guest curator or artist to create a show, so that it's not just my vision that dominates."

Yet Art Collective WA's prolific activities occur in a tough environment. While Indigenous art is faring better, Perth is suffering a general decline in art purchases by

university and corporate art collections, and even the Art Gallery of Western Australia.

"They have shrinking acquisition budgets, and we don't have many regional art galleries to sell to, unlike other states," Johnston explains. "Individual buyers are now our main purchasers. They tend to be professional types who like to buy from around Australia, but some have a deliberate policy of supporting the state's visual artists."

"At this stage we will continue, as long as we are doing good things," she says. "We don't want to forget our core business to represent established WA artists and raise their profile. We just have to stick to that."

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FORTHCOMING PROGRAM HIGHLIGHTS



BRAD RIMMER *Nowhere*

Near | 16 SEPTEMBER TO 14
OCTOBER | Art Collective WA, Perth

Brad Rimmer's photographic trilogy exploring rural Australia and the emotional impact of the natural landscape continues in *Nowhere Near*. Rimmer was born in the Wheatbelt region of Western Australia, and focuses here on the region's languishing town halls. "Brad feels nostalgic about how they used to be the centre of town, but many now lie destitute, maybe repurposed, decaying or even demolished," says Johnston. The exhibition and accompanying book serve as a poignant reflection on the past, what we leave behind and what remains.

JOANNA LAMB

Melbourne Art Fair |
22 TO 25 FEBRUARY 2024

Joanna Lamb creates hard-edged and highly refined compositions of urban spaces, but this time she focuses on gardens as an extension of suburban life. Lamb describes them as "abstract poems in colour and shape". Since her first solo show in 1997, she has maintained a regular exhibiting schedule traversing the practices of painting, printmaking, collage and sculpture. Johnston says the latest works emerge from Lamb's memories and nostalgic feelings about her environment, wavering in style between realism and abstraction. Art Collective is proud to dedicate its presence at Melbourne Art Fair to this dynamic artist.





ART COLLECTIVE WA

TEN | 24 SEPTEMBER TO 21
JANUARY 2024 | Holmes à Court
Gallery, Vasse Felix Winery, Margaret River

A showcase of artist members' work commemorating Art Collective WA's ten-year anniversary. "If you're looking for a survey of WA's most senior artists, this is it," says Johnston. "In a beautiful big space in Margaret River, there will be amazing new works by all our artists, including painting, sculpture and photography." Among the 36-member cohort of artists, TEN offers a snapshot of the richness and diversity of their art practice. On display will be works such as **Giles Hohnen's** colour-saturated abstract paintings, **Brad Rimmer's** evocative landscape photographs and **Olga Cironis'** socially-charged sculptures made from found materials, among many others.



GEORGE HAYNES

In Search of Painting |
21 OCTOBER TO 18 NOVEMBER |
Art Collective WA, Perth

One of the most important exhibitions on the WA gallery calendar, this is a tribute to **George Haynes**, a respected painter, teacher and mentor who has produced memorable work over 60 years. Born in Kenya and a student of the Chelsea School of Art in London, Haynes is known as a master of light, creating canvasses drenched in colour and capturing aspects of everyday Australian life and landscape. Johnston says it offers a rare opportunity to view 150 of the artists' new, recent and retrospective paintings, many of which justly reside in the nation's prestigious public and private collections. The fifth Art Collective WA monograph will be launched in conjunction with this special celebration of 85-year-old Haynes.

OPPOSITE ABOVE: Brad Rimmer, *Corrigin Town Hall, Spring 2020, 2022*. Archival pigment print, 100 x 134cm.

OPPOSITE BELOW: Joanna Lamb, *Streetside Garden 02, 2023*. Acrylic on Superfine polyester, 180 x 240cm.

ABOVE LEFT: Chris Hopewell, *Seventh Circle, 2023*. Acrylic and resin on marine ply, 122 x 81cm.

ABOVE RIGHT: George Haynes, *Light, 2023*. Oil on canvas, 101 x 122cm.

COURTESY: THE ARTISTS AND ART COLLECTIVE WA, PERTH.