



INSIDE THE GALLERY PODCAST – SERIES 6 EPISODE 8 (June 2024)

Grace Crowley & Ralph Balson – Ian Potter Centre NGV
Curator: Beckett Rozentals

Tim Stackpool:

Beckett, first of all, thank you so much for joining us on Inside the Gallery.

Beckett Rozentals:

My absolute pleasure.

Tim Stackpool:

So I have to ask, why did you choose Grace and Ralph for this exhibition?

Beckett Rozentals:

Well, I guess something which I like to think about when introducing the exhibition is that despite the romantic image of the lone genius, there are very few artists who actually work without some form of community of practice. But for Grace Crowley and Ralph Balson, it's this collaboration, a common vision that were integral to their respective artistic approaches from the 1930s. And I'm drawn not only to their phenomenal body of work, but also this very unique and enduring artistic partnership which they share.

That they're both born in 1890, both with very different upbringings. Grace Crowley was born in country New South Wales and commenced full-time studies at Julian Ashton, Sydney Art School in 1915 and she was actually appointed head teacher there in 1918 and a few years later, in 1926, Grace Crowley and Ann Dango, who had met at art school, travelled to France to further their academic pursuits. And it's there that Crowley studies under celebrated cubist André Lhote and very briefly with Albert Gleizes. And it's there where she's absolutely seduced by modernism.

Balson, instead, he was raised in Dorset in England and he was apprenticed to a plumber and house painter when he was 13 years of age before he moved to Australia 10 years later. And he was a primarily self-taught artist, and he enrolled in night classes at the Sydney Art School in the early 1920s. And it's here where one of his teachers is actually Grace Crowley and they're reacquainted again on her return to Australia in 1930.

So the exhibition really looks at their move into pure abstraction, which was for the time a very radical thing to do in Australian art history. And it looks as well as how they found the life of abstract artists in Australia very challenging. And although they make this radical plunge into pure abstraction after World War I starts really, although modernism's widely accepted, the art world is relatively hostile to non-objective art at this time, but they persist and the work they produce is just incredible, including they're experimental, they're working with metallic paint, their creative output is really quite fascinating.

Tim Stackpool:

You are obviously very, very excited and enthusiastic about this couple.

Beckett Rozentals:

Absolutely.

Tim Stackpool:

They come from such different places though, and I just wonder if that's, I mean, it's not so much opposites attract with these two, but their work is very different to each other.

Beckett Rozentals:

Yeah, and there are moments where you can really see the synergies between their artistic practices but also those contrasts as well. And the thing is for these artists is that they're working very closely together. I guess Grace Crowley, when she comes back from her time abroad, she begins teaching at Dorrit Black's Modern Art Centre and where she's reacquainted with Balson, she and Raf Azel, who she's

met up with briefly overseas, they open up their own art school in Sydney. It's located on George Street. And it attracts these artists who are increasingly interested in abstraction, including Balson, who actually paints the interior being a house painter. That's what he does.

And this school becomes, this emerges as this leading centre for modernism in Australia during the 1930s and following the closure of the school, this is when the school closes in 1937, they move their practice to Crowley's own studio apartment and it's there they begin working exclusively together and they're sharing ideas and bouncing off one another, but they're also sharing materials.

Our conservator has been analysing the paints used. The paints from her paintings are reflected in his paintings too. Although when the opening of the exhibition is a work by Grace Crowley from 1947 and a work by Balson from about 1948 circa date. And you walk in and you can instantly tell the one which is quintessentially Grace Crowley, the one which is quintessentially Ralph Balson. It sees key works from their careers, which really show who they are and where they're going in their artistic practice. But at the same time you can see that shared palette, that rigor which is going on between the two of them of discussion and talking through ideas. And so as you're saying, there's that differences, but the closer you look as well, you can see some real similarities between the two artist's work.

Tim Stackpool:

I can see this work a little bit more subjectively than perhaps you can. And you talked about it being modernism, but the work is so relevant today still, in fact, it's hard for me to date as opposed to perhaps how a curator may see it. But I don't necessarily see history in that work. I see a lot of contemporary, to be honest.

Beckett Rozentals:

Absolutely. I think that when people come into the exhibition, it will be shocked about how contemporary the works look. It really does. And I think that's what's really phenomenal about these artists at the time. For instance, they're included in the Royal Society of Artists exhibition, their annual show in 1942, both with constructive works, non-objective artworks. And there's a huge lengthy seven-page review published in the publication for it, and they're not mentioned at all. Their names don't even come up. And I think they were just working so ahead of what was accepted at the time.

And so it's not until you're getting into the mid 1950s that pure abstraction, non-objective artwork, becomes more widely accepted. So I think it looks so contemporary because they were also just working ahead of what audiences were expecting at the time as well. And in 1941, Ralph Balson mounts a solo exhibition in Anthony Hordern's galleries in Sydney, and it's the first exhibition of purely abstract work in the country. None of it sells. It's relatively overlooked and we now recognise it as a really watershed moment in Australian art history.

And Grace Crowley, following Balson's death, she really went on to promote his legacy and oversaw the acquisition of many of his works into major institutions. And if you look at collections today, most major institutions, I mean, not only do they hold a Balson and the Grace Crowley work, but they're represented by works from this 1941 exhibition as well. It really was this key moment.

And what's also quite interesting about these works and Balson's output, when they're moving from semi abstraction to pure abstraction, is that his works, from about 1937 to about 1946, actually signed by Grace Crowley with his name inscribed in her distinctive geometric handwriting, which really, I mean, that is a very unusual thing to do and I can't think of any other artistic partnership where someone employs the other to sign their name for them.

And it really reflects this intimacy of their painting partnership, but also looking closely at these signatures she's done for him. Her geometric script is phenomenal, but it's not a rushed thing. His name has been carefully inscribed into the works first perhaps with a sharpened pencil, maybe even a pin, the

R-B-A-L all carefully marked out first before then carefully painting over it in a top layer of paint. This is an incredibly intimate thing to do for another artist and it hasn't been taken on lightly, so it's really quite fascinating how they're working together at this time.

Tim Stackpool:

Yeah, I wonder whether they were so visionary that they knew they were messing with us so far in the future by doing this sort of stuff.

Beckett Rozentals:

We are very lucky that she wrote quite extensively and kept a wonderful archive. There's a wonderful archive held at the Art Gallery of New South Wales of her letters and her notes, notes on what Balson was reading before this moment in 1941, what he was reading afterwards. But she did try to write herself out of the story a little bit. She was highly critical of her own work. She destroyed... I mean, they both destroyed work and that's not uncommon or reused work, not uncommon during wartime restrictions to paint on both sides of Masonite or cardboard, they used quite a lot during the wartime restrictions, but it wasn't uncommon for artists to repurpose materials.

However, she already had a very small body of work. She was not nearly as prolific as Balson, but she was also highly critical and either discarded or destroyed a lot more of her work, which leaves quite significant gaps. And so when Balson passed away and she was pushing to have his work acquired by major institutions and collections or when she was being interviewed about his practice, there was an underplaying of her own contribution. It's widely accepted that their move into pure abstraction was one of mutual collaboration and artistic endeavour together.

And following his death, she was promoting the Art Gallery of New South Wales to mount exhibition of his work, a solo exhibition, and the Art Gallery of New South Wales actually instead mounted a exhibition of Balson, Crowley, Raf Azel, and Frank Hinder. And this recognition from an institution in 1966, was a very big deal for all the artists really but in particular Crowley, this really threw her into the public realm and something which she was almost shying away from. And it was a really key moment in her career and in her own lifetime to be recognised with this group exhibition at the Art Gallery of New South Wales. And they went on to do a retrospective of her work in 1975. She passes away in 1978. So although she underplayed her contribution, that equal sort of mutual collaboration is now widely accepted.

Tim Stackpool:

In putting this show together, I think you've probably discovered quite an intimate history between them. Why do you think they worked together so well for so long and it was really only death that separated them?

Beckett Rozentals:

They had a phenomenal respect and understanding and vision together. I think that together, they really pushed their artistic boundaries. I think that they were a form of support for one another, a way to work out ideas. And their painting partnerships starts in the late 1930s, painting exclusively till his passing in 1964. They're not young artists at that point either. If you think about the fact they're born in 1890.

It's phenomenal, this exhibition of pure abstraction in 1941, he's 51 years old and he's a plumber, sorry, was apprentice to a house plumber and painter at 13 in Dorset, and he's holding the first exhibition of pure abstraction in Australia. That in itself is phenomenal. And getting through into the 1940s, they're getting into their fifties. And then when, in 1954, she purchases a property in Mittagong and, I guess, it's sort of preempting his retirement and she transforms the garage into a studio and following his retirement, it's the first time in his life he's able to fully dedicate himself to his artistic practice.

And maybe it is that Grace Crowley herself is ready for her own retirement. But from this point onwards, she paints very little. Well, this is to be one of the most prolific times of Balson's career. And also sees him go through some really major stylistic changes to those more sorts of dabbed, intense, lattice-worked pieces.

And then in 1960, he has his first trip overseas since his arrival in Australia in 1913, he and Crowley go overseas together and they travel extensively through America, Europe, England, they're doing a lot of travel. And on his return back, he embarks on this series in his early seventies of semi-automatic poured paints sort of inspired by abstracts expressionists such as Jackson Pollock.

There's that later part of his career where she's pulling back a lot of her own artistic practice. She's still there as that sort of support and person to talk to and work through ideas. The painting partnership is an incredibly important part, not just because of the output, but through the intellectual rigor that they have together.

Tim Stackpool:

They obviously inspired each other, but do you think, or do you know if there was significant inspiration prior to that, that kind of led them down this path which was synergistic but yet distinctive?

Beckett Rozentals:

Yes. I mean, Grace Crowley of course has the influence of André Lhote and Albert Gleizes and Dangar sends back letters of correspondence from France informing of the Mary Webb, goes on to be conduit of what's happening in the French art world in the 1950s. They also have in their circle the Hindas who, Mondale Hinda is an American-born sculptor and the Hindas bring to Australia with them as well firsthand experience with the American art world and publications from overseas.

And in 1937, there's a really key publication, Circle, which is about constructivism. And so this is published, one of the contributors main people involved is Ben Nicholson, and of course constructivism has its origins in Soviet Russia. The Russian Revolution, 1917, and constructivism really spreads around the world quite quickly. And although there were no Australian artists mentioned in Circle, that was a publication which was available. And it's around that time that artists such as Balson, Hinda, and Crowley as well start to use the word constructive or variations thereof on their own artworks.

You can also see the influence of Mondrian in Balson's work. And from the time about 1946, 1947, you really see the removal of any sort of circular or long angular, rectangular forms. He's got this illusion of transparency, which isn't the paint being transparent, but is actually the illusion. He's mixed all the paints. It's got this illusion of transparency, but it's at this time that he really starts to introduce these right angles. And you see this influence of Mondrian on his practice.

Not only are they using each other to do that sort of radical plunge into pure abstraction, they're very well-read. They are really in touch of what's going on in the art world, so they're working together, but they're also very educated in art history.

Tim Stackpool:

Yeah. Now, you spoke about how they travelled extensively in their later years and then how that influenced Ralph's work when they returned. Do you feel any sort of level of disappointment that perhaps he didn't have that inspiration earlier in his career, how we would've seen these works differ had he had some further years before his death to create these works that we saw after that extensive travel?

Beckett Rozentals:

It's interesting. From a personal perspective, I'm very drawn to his constructive works from the 1940s to the 1950s. I think that is the strongest part of his career. I find his later works very interesting. But

what's fascinating is for an artist who was so focused on colour for the majority of his career, when he comes to these semi-automatic, poured paintings, you really see colour start to disappear from this.

And in his last solo exhibition in 1963, which was held at Macquarie Galleries in Sydney, I think it's about 17 works, which he includes in the exhibition. Many of these works included are actually black and white, and their focus on the imagery created through the slippage of the monochromatic enamel rather than on colour. So I think that's very fascinating, but I think that for them, I guess, that was the right time where they felt to travel. And he was married with three children, he was painting, he didn't have the opportunity to paint exclusively until he'd retired. So I guess there just hadn't been opportunity either to travel internationally until he had retired.

Tim Stackpool:

And it was difficult to do in that period as well, unlike how easy it's for us to get around the world today.

Beckett Rozentals:

Oh, absolutely. It's such a different set of circumstances and everything to go with that as well. But what he picks up from that additional travel is really fascinating about how it inspires him and the changes that he is able to go through following retirement. Those years between 1955 and 1964, there's a period of great change in enthusiasm in his artistic practice.

Tim Stackpool:

Just getting back to some practical considerations. You mentioned earlier about painting on the back of each other's works, which was not unusual during wartime and periods of when materials and resources were lacking. Did you come across any surprises in that respect?

Beckett Rozentals:

Oh, we've had many surprises and many wonderful things come through in the research. And of course it's not uncommon for artists to repurpose their own materials, but for what's a little bit unique about Crowley/Balson is the reusing of... For instance, Crowley discarding her work essentially giving it to Balson to paint on. And we have found in a couple of collections instances where you have a Ralph Balson painting on one side and a Grace Crowley painted on the other. We've exhibited those so that you can walk around-

Tim Stackpool:

Amazing.

Beckett Rozentals:

... the paintings and see them from both sides. The Balson, for both of them is signed and dated, which indicates that it was ready and signed for exhibition. The Crowley works themselves are varnished, which indicates as well that they were completed works. But what's very interesting is a discovery which we made in our own collection, we have two works I've just spoken about on card. We have a work in the NGV collection, a painting on canvas by Grace Crowley, a portrait from the late 1930s. It was included in Exhibition One, which was the first exhibition of semi-abstract in the country. And it's been in the NGV collection since 1981. It was a bequest of the artist.

And while our conservator, Raye Collins, she was doing work in preparation for the show. We have on the backs of works, which are in storage or on display, we have a foam-core backing. Once you remove this backing, it turned out that the backing board for the canvas was slotted into the frame, but the canvas itself stapled to the frame, which is very odd. Normally, you would attach the canvas to the support.

Tim Stackpool:

Sure.

Beckett Rozentals:

But instead the canvas was stapled to the frame and slotted into the frame was a painted-out work. So you could tell that there was a painting there with a grey paint over the top. Now, often if you repurposed a piece of Masonite or card, the artist may paint out the side that they didn't want to keep. As a way to differentiate, "This is now my finished painting, this is the work I don't want anymore."

Raye ends me a message said, "Oh, Beckett, I found something a little bit fascinating here. So we've got to painted-out work just separate to the canvas slotted in the back and there are three tantalising inscriptions, which say 'Crowley, Balson, and storage'."

Now, we know that in 1941, for the very real threat of Sydney Harbour being bombed, Crowley and Balson put a large amount of work from that period into storage at Balson's family home in Maroubra. So we already know that a lot of work went into storage, but this was very interesting that we have work slotted into a frame, the canvas is stapled to the frame, and lo and behold, when she pulled out the backing board and turned it the other way around, on the other side was a completely finished varnished Balson. We don't think that this work was discarded. In fact, we think that it was efficient storage.

What's better when you're storing work that if you can fit two in the space of one? In fact, what further supports this is that the work, which was slotted into the frame, postdates the work by Crowley. So we don't think at all that this work had been discarded. The work which was painted out, yes. But we believe that this work slotted into the frame was done so it could be protected. Now, perhaps the fact that these works stayed in storage until Balson's passing in 1964, perhaps it was forgotten about and then it was gifted to the gallery, and at the time no one really looked at that painted-out work as anything more than just a backing board.

I mean, let's just say, it's a little bit exciting when you're working on an exhibition. Now, you just happen to find a whole new work to add to the artist's canon, so it's really exciting to see this work on display, the colours pop. I mean, it has been, I guess as well, for the last 40 or so years, kept at the right temperature and humidity, accidentally preserved in this little time capsule, and it's just been hiding in plain sight this whole time in our own collection. So that has been, wow, I mean, what a treat to discover that, so that's been just wonderful.

Tim Stackpool:

An incredible discovery there, Beckett.

Beckett Rozentals:

Oh, a delight.

Tim Stackpool:

Now tell me, are all the items on display, are they all from your collection?

Beckett Rozentals:

No, so we've borrowed extensively. We have works from private collectors, predominantly Melbourne, Sydney private collectors. We have major loans from the Art Gallery of New South Wales and the National Gallery of Australia, as well as other major institutions, South Australia, WA, QAG, so, Queensland, Tasmania. And so I think we've borrowed extensively from around the country.

It's the first exhibition to do a major pairing of the artists. Of course, you regularly see them side by side in collection hangs, but this is the first major exhibition to do this. There's over 80 works as well as ephemera, and it's really exciting to see all the works together. I've done a few public programs and

talks, which have been lots of people there and enjoying the exhibition, which has been fantastic, and we've had some really great responses to the exhibition. It's such an absolute joy and a privilege to work on it. Not only am I passionate about the artist, I think it looks really good, so I encourage everyone to come and see it, of course.

Tim Stackpool:

You talked extensively there about finding hidden gems and also borrowing items from other galleries. Is there a piece though, however, that you wish you could lay your hands on, or is there a missing part of the history that you haven't been able to hang on the wall?

Beckett Rozentals:

Well, it's interesting. It's that period between 1939 and 1947 for Grace Crowley, where we have very few works, surviving works. We know that she was exhibiting, we have the exhibition catalogues to show it, but the thing is that from that period, there are very few which we found. There is the work which we found on the back of a private collector's work, which we have on display, which really fills that gap. And also another work from a private collector in Sydney where Grace Crowley herself has used metallic paint, which is something Balson's more known for. And it's the only work we know of where she has used metallic paint.

I would love to find another work, which she referred to as her linear rhythms, is what she exhibited them as. The conservator, Raye Collins and I, we're pretty certain that the work on the back of the private collectors, the Andrew Collection, we are pretty sure it would've been one of those linear rhythms exhibited in 1944. But oh, I'd love to find another one of those. But it is most likely that it has been painted over the top of.

But we've been doing infrared and X-rays of the works coming in. Lots of interesting research happening to try and find out the stories underneath because not only, as I said, they've painted on one side and then on the other, but sometimes it's been painted on again on both sides. So we're looking at X-rays, you're getting like four paintings coming through. There's a lot hiding beneath these surfaces. And so I think the likelihood of finding a linear rhythm is unlikely, but we did find that Balson hiding in our own collection, so there's always a chance.

Tim Stackpool:

Yeah, who knows. Now, I don't want to distract from this exhibition you have running at the moment, but before we wrap up, do you want to preview anything or tease us with something that you have coming up? You guys are always working on projects, on top of projects.

Beckett Rozentals:

As you'd be aware that in about two years ago, we amalgamated our Australian and First Nations departments, which has been a really wonderful event for the gallery. And as of last September, we did a complete rehang of our level two galleries, really showcasing this amalgamation and unification of the two teams. And traditionally, when you entered level two permanent collection galleries, you kind of started with British arrival and this new rehang has really looked at what was... There was a lot happening in Australia prior to that time. So there's been that recast of their permanent galleries. So I recommend anyone who hasn't been to our permanent collection galleries recently to look and get a glimpse of what we've been doing there as well.

Tim Stackpool:

That's very exciting, Beckett, very good news. This current exhibition with Grace and Ralph's work, it finishes in September, will you be disappointed when that wraps up?

Beckett Rozentals:

I will be. I have to say that I have enjoyed just being in the space, even just the lead up to it and the installation, working on my laptop in the space, just being surrounded by all these works, seeing connections between works, which I've only seen side by side in a PowerPoint before because one's from Newcastle and one's from a private collection in WA. Those sorts of things. There's something seeing these works together and just realising how carefully thought out and constructed they are. I mean, they're just fascinating works. And so it's just been so nice to see them all together and to really feel immersed in their artistic journey. So yeah, I'll be sad when it finishes.

Tim Stackpool:

Well, we certainly know that you've poured everything of yourself into this exhibition and that of your team as well, Beckett. Congratulations on putting it together. We'll get along and see it. But until then, thank you so much for joining us on the podcast.

Beckett Rozentals:

Thank you very much.