RE-REGISTER: AUSTRALIAN WOMEN SCULPTORS FROM THE WOMEN'S ART REGISTER

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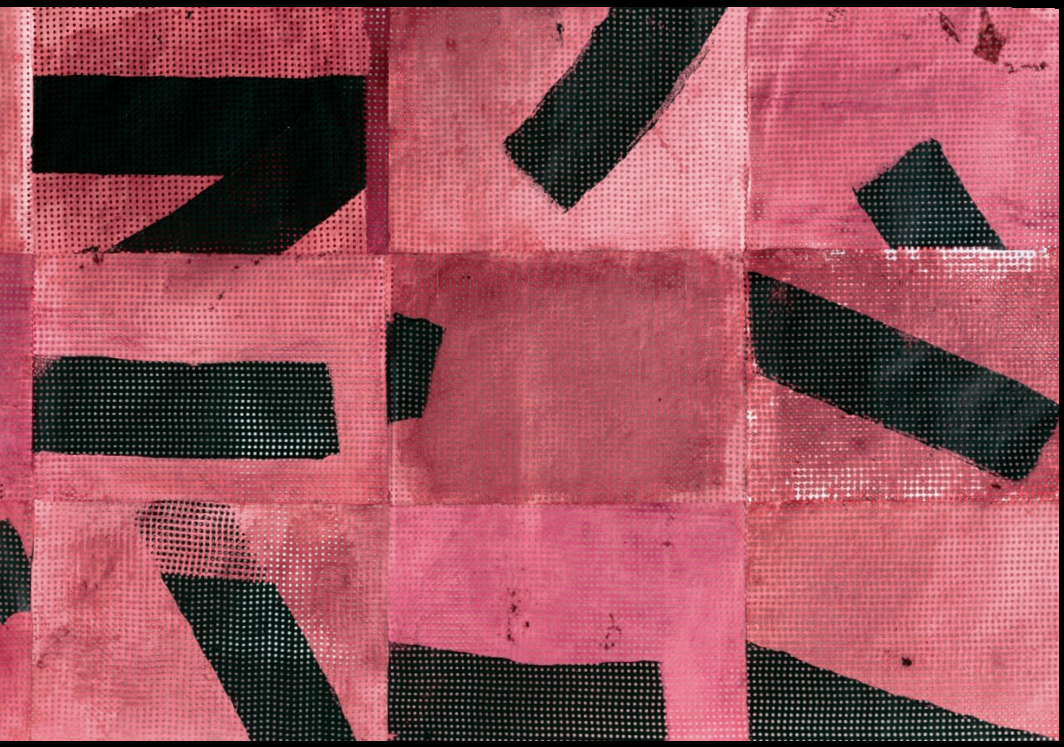

RE-REGISTERED: WITH SUSTAINING CARE

DR KATVE-KAISA KONTTURI

This little essay tells the story of how matters of media archaeology led an artist to return to her own artistic history and, due to timing, to her family history too.

When Julia Boros began to dig into the archive of women sculptors' history in Australia, she was struck by the photographs of makers over many decades: their willful, 'strong eyes' appealed to her. But there was no way of reproducing these old photographs for the exhibition; they would pixelate beyond recognition – reducing to the dots, as in halftone-printing[1]. So Boros turned to the written documents that fascinated her as well. There was an abundance of hand-typed documents, and carefully hand-written correspondence too. These witnessed the hundreds of hours of embodied labour that had gone into creating the pioneering archive of over forty women sculptors from 1860 to 1960. This extensive research was conducted by Bonita Ely and Anna Sande, and was, upon its publication in 1978, presented partly in the primary educational medium of its time: photographic slides.

In thinking about how to represent and make these women sculptors' work resonant today, Boros found her way back to print media, which she had abandoned after taking up sculpture more than a decade ago. It was the 'inky', 'printy' presence of the hand-typed and hand-written material, and those pixelated dots, that directed her that way. More precisely, Boros's solution was to re-register these women's work, as is made clear in the exhibition title, *Re-Register: Australian Women Sculptors from the Women's Art Register*. In the title, there is an obvious reference to the institution where Boros had volunteered and undertaken a year-long residency. But there is also the history and practice of a specific medium: in printing vocabulary, registration is an indispensable part of producing a print. It is how one spatially aligns the elements to be printed, or relates them to each other.

What is it, then, that Julia Boros has related in her exhibition to represent women's work?

The twelve letters in four rows (UNK-NOW-NHA-NDS) that form the word 'unknown hands' are iterated throughout the exhibition. The concept of 'unknown hands' refers to the work of women still often unacknowledged in the histories of art – including the dedicated work of people involved in institutions such as the Women's Art Register. Hands are, after all, what almost every maker's work comes down to and is dependent on. No matter the media, hands are often essential for employing it: for typing, putting together slides, for sculpting, and making prints. Yet the work that hands do is often almost imperceptible, not easily recognised, though they are almost always there.

The masterpiece of the exhibition is a white curtain onto which women sculptors' 'unknown hands' are re-registered in an almost imperceptible, not easily recognisable way – which is further accentuated in the four-row typesetting. This effect is a result of using a specific print medium called devoré on a delicate, silk and rayon satin. Devoré is a print medium that is executed by creating patterns through a chemical process where part of the cellulose fibres of the fabric are dissolved. When Boros spread the premixed paste on the blended fabric, the dissolved printed sections reveal the 'unknown hands' in translucent silk. While the devoré technique can be traced back to at least the 1700s, when it was developed as a poor man's lace, the 1920s saw devoré dresses established as haute-couture creations, and they were later revived in the high street fashion of the 1990s. Reviving devoré again, this time as a hand-print technique for contemporary art, Boros makes a subtle material statement that embraces women's work that was once almost dissolved from history but that has nevertheless been sustained, through the efforts of human hands.

To appreciate the work of the 'unknown hands', Boros has printed women artists' names – following the font type of the archival material. Again, the letters are typeset in an unusual order, and also covered with a waxy surface, which makes reading them a tangible effort; again, the labour that goes into sustaining women's art is made present. There is also a print series of strong hands – hands that sculpt, hands that give a visual, visceral form for the decades of unknown hands and disordered names.

But, for Boros, the printed hands have a personal meaning, too. They serve as a reference to her Hungarian background, as the inspiration for the hands is derived from an old Hungarian drawing handbook she found at her paternal grandmother's home. Indirectly, they are her mother's strong, beautiful hands that did not mould marble or cast bronze; gardening was her form of art. During the working process for this exhibition, Boros became a carer for her mother who had fallen permanently ill and later passed away. This life situation impressed itself distinctly on Boros's choice to return to her old medium of printing – to a period in her life when she had unlimited time to dedicate herself to printing and reprinting, for days, weeks, even a year. But now, caring for her mother, she had to be more reasonable, more contained. Not less committed, but more focused – that is, sustainable, in more than one sense of the word: sustainable as not to produce a mass of prints to a world already filled with a profusion of art; sustainable as not to sacrifice everything for the sake of art, yet still sustaining the work of generations before her. What she printed, she printed sensibly, with sustaining care.

1. The 'eye prints' were repurposed as limited edition tote bags to assist the Women's Art Register's fundraising efforts, and provided an opportunity for the artist to reciprocate the support she received during her residency.

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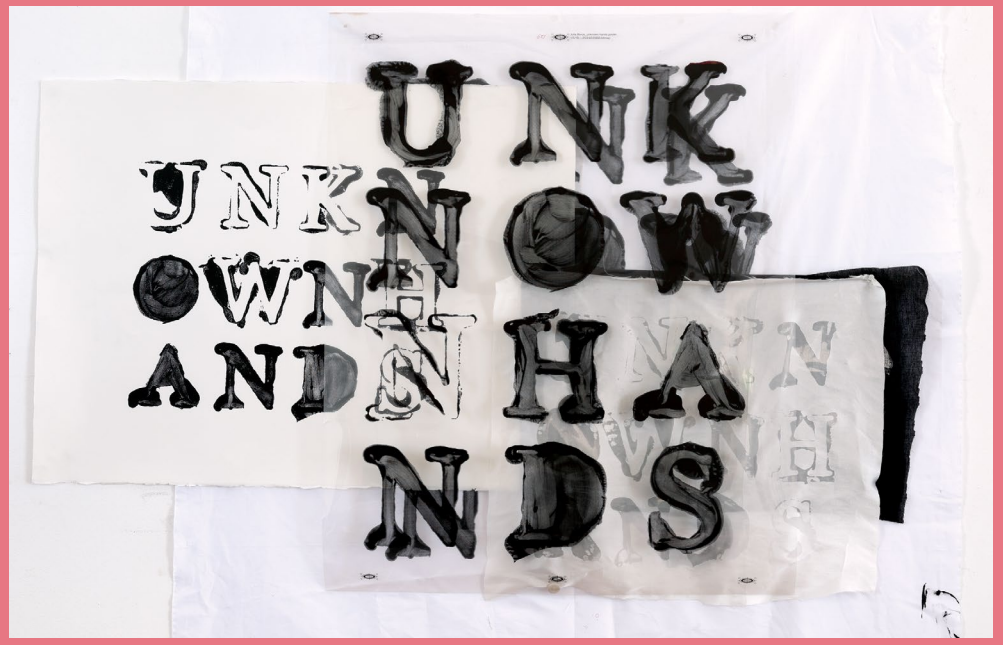


JULIA BOROS

INAUGURAL WOMEN'S ART REGISTER ARTIST-IN-RESIDENCE, 2019

This exhibition of new work responds to the archives of the Women's Art Register, in particular to the 1978 research and exhibition project *Profile of Australian Women Sculptors 1860–1960*. That research, undertaken by Bonita Ely and Anna Sande (both early members of the Women's Art Register), resulted in a substantial publication that highlights the life and work of 41 women artists, a slide kit, a series of photographic portraits, and two exhibitions[1].

A year ago I began to discover the contributions of these sculptors for myself, and furthermore, to uncover the labour behind the research, by the women who worked to put these artists' contributions back in the picture. As the 1978 introductory text explains, the list of artists chosen for the project was not representative of every Australian woman sculptor of that period, but was exhaustive within the limitations of the available time.

Similarly, the artwork I have recently created for this exhibition is limited by the unique circumstances of my own life, that of multiple trips interstate to care for my Mother, and then managing her Estate with her recent passing. I am now about to relocate myself once more, this time permanently. I am going home. Via the same process that was methodically carried out in the comprehensive research by Ely and Sande, that of looking back to move forward, the thread of this textile based exhibition intertwines the past with the present, and orientates to the future.

I am grateful for the opportunity to delve into the archive of the Women's Art Register and actively reassess the research, images and stories from 1978. Whilst recently speaking with Anna Sande in the WAR archives – the tardis-like location of this exceptional *Collection of National Significance*[2] – we discussed the importance of a consistent location to the practice of art.

Since 1978 the Women's Art Register has operated from its current site – thanks to the support of the Richmond Library – creating a stable repository for this important resource. Since the 1978 P.A.W.S. project, I have moved interstate three times. It is only now, through this Artist-In-Residence experience, that I have been able to reflect on the impact of these upheavals in my life and art practice.

Some of the black and white photographic portraits of the women sculptors uncovered through the 1978 research, hang in the Women's Art Register office. They provide the touchstone for the development of the new work made for this exhibition. The grainy, yellowed, low-resolution images were transferred from newsprint and negatives, to photographic screens for printing. Most of the screens are made using halftones. Halftones are small dots in different shapes and sizes that when printed produce variations in tone using one colour. I was struck by this process, and the images it produced, and used this as a starting point for further processes of printing, registration, and discovery of the women behind these names. Using the techniques of devoré (a process of etching away a portion of the fibres in a textile) and screenprinting, all the printed images in the exhibition are designed using this halftone method, to connect the historical with the contemporary.

Commencing with the images of the women themselves, I abstracted the pictorial elements down to their eyes, hands, and ultimately, the text of their names, whilst in the process exposing the erasure of historical knowledge, and the persistent lack of equality in representation that produces a phenomenon of 'un-naming' women in/from art. The artworks also reference the people who do the work behind the scenes; the women whose hands tirelessly wrote and typed the constant stream of correspondence; who cared for and expanded the archive for over forty years; who advocated for and promoted Australian women artists; and those who continue to do all these things today. What began as a desire to acknowledge the achievements, persistence and resilience of the 41 named sculptors, became a tribute to the many unknown hands of all women artists.

This year-long project has been unique for many reasons. It speaks to the labour of the lesser-known, historic women sculptors revealed through the original research, and to the tireless efforts of the many involved with the Women's Art Register – past and present – some of whom I have been fortunate to meet with and share my thoughts. The processes of planning and making the works for this exhibition have also been achieved while I cared for and grieved the passing of my Mother. I would like to dedicate this exhibition to my Mother's hands; they showed me the way into this world and now guide me to the next.

JULIABOROS.COM

1. The *Profile of Australian Women Sculptors 1860–1960* was exhibited at Mildura Arts Centre, 25 March–28 May, 1978, for the 7th Mildura Sculpture Triennial, and at Carringbush Regional Library, Richmond, 1–21 August, 1978.
2. In 2009, a Significance Assessment Report was commissioned by the Women's Art Register, funded by the National Library of Australia. The archive was determined as a *Collection of National Significance*.

PROFILE OF AUSTRALIAN WOMEN SCULPTORS 1860–1960

ANNA SANDE AND BONITA ELY

TEXT TAKEN FROM THE INTRODUCTION TO THE PROFILE (1978)

This 'profile' does not pretend to be a definitive study of the work of Australian women sculptors. It offers only a fraction of the evidence of their achievements.

Women sculptors have, by and large, missed the scrutiny and appreciation accorded most of their male counterparts, in fact the background of all Australian sculpture has been comparatively neglected until recently[1].

Where women sculptors have been included in what documentation does exist they are most often lonely figures and their isolation, and ironically their occasional inclusion, seems to give them a freakish taint. Limited research would suggest that this is not a true picture, and that working 'alongside' those few recognized women were a number of professional and dedicated female sculptors.

Nests of memorabilia and reference to the work of women sculptors are scattered throughout the suburbs, hidden away by many self-effacing individuals, friends of the sculptor or her family. These unique documents, often the only surviving indications of these women's achievements, are in danger of being lost forever unless some concerted effort is soon made to gather, cohere and make them available. This 'profile' is a tentative step in that direction; a necessary beginning if we are ever to be able to develop an awareness of women's contribution to Australian sculpture. Without an historical background and some familiarity with past works it seems inevitable that we will continue to draw solely on men's work for comparative examples. At the moment we are simply without a female 'vocabulary' in historical studies of sculpture. But the work IS there, and once an acquaintance with it is established there should be a basis for a more comprehensive and sensitive understanding of women's sculpture past and present, and a ground for more expanded definition and parallels, at present only possible in a male context.

It has been suggested that if the slides of this 'profile' were to be screened untitled, that many a 'stroller-by' might be forgiven for assuming them to be the work of men. The nature of sculpture has so long been taught and thought of as a peculiarly male idiom – large, strong, involving many mechanical processes and brawn. How good it would be to reach for a comparison in the language of women's work without hesitation. At the moment this is almost impossible without deliberately 'digging out' the scattered and secreted evidence of women's achievements.

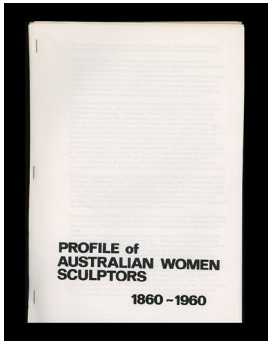
Piecing together what information we could find over several months was a laborious but exciting and inspiring process. We hardly ceased to wonder at how much we had been deprived – what little women's work had been brought to our attention at art school.

Because our investigations are so preliminary it seemed unwise, and at this stage, unnecessary to attempt to critically interpret. Instead we have assembled the work (in slide form), and statements by the sculptors (as many as could be drawn out), in such a way that we hope they will speak for themselves, and we hope the evidence will speak loudly and clearly to those, like ourselves, previously unaware of the considerable body of women's sculpture from 1860 onward. During the gathering process we came across much neglect of work and wrong accreditation. Pieces by Margaret Baskerville were credited to her husband. A number of Ola Cohn's works were summarily painted brown (the same brown as they painted the floor), by over zealous renovators of her Gipps Street studio. Eileen McGrath's work was documented by her fellow students and staff at Sydney Tech, a painstaking tribute printed at the school, however the book has been filed away with other 'artifacts' and few people have nowadays heard of this outstanding student.

In drawing attention to women's work specifically, there seems a need to be wary of contributing to its becoming a temporary curiosity, a marketable cult. Hence our particular concern with works from the past – without historical foundation contemporary work sometimes seems poised on the dizzy precipice of acceptance, a cultural vacuum without a context of things past. Australian women's sculpture does have a history. But gathering the fragmented accumulation of centuries is a formidable task, and one that becomes less possible, and certainly less accurate as the days go by and older women are lost to us and records and works destroyed or dispersed.

A list of over forty women sculptors, working within the designated time span, was compiled for the 'profile'. As will be obvious the information offered on each fluctuates considerably. This should not be taken to indicate that because there is less information recorded here that that particular woman was any less dedicated, rather it illustrates the general difficulty in securing relevant information. Many of the sculptors chosen are no longer alive and access to their works and papers was limited, some women were reluctant to contribute – maybe they wondered why the sudden turnabout, the sudden interest? – others were extremely helpful and supportive. In all cases we have done our best to let the women and their work speak for themselves. Below are the names of all the women we attempted to research, the list in itself should not be considered exhaustive and we apologize in advance for any glaring omissions. We hope that what we have 'got together' will fire the enthusiasm of others and bring to light more information about the work of Australia's women sculptors.

1. At the moment three people are working on, or have publications in progress, about Australian sculpture — Graham Sturgeon and Ken Scarlett in Melbourne, and Noel Hutchison in Tasmania — there may be others we are not aware of, if so it would be good to hear about or from them. The Ballarat Gallery's exhibition of Australian sculpture, held in 1976, was a significant contribution to assessing Australia's sculptural heritage. Ron Radford and Noel Hutchison are to be congratulated for their efforts.



AUSTRALIAN WOMEN SCULPTORS WORKING PRIOR TO 1960
FROM *PROFILE OF AUSTRALIAN WOMEN SCULPTORS 1860–1960*

Ruth Adams Erica Baneth Dora Barclay May Barrie Margaret Baskerville Eva Benson Esther Belliss Lorraine Boreham Theresa Chauncy Ola Cohn Theodora Cowan Fairlie Cunningham Marea Gazzard Ann Dobson May Butler George Pam Hallandal Margel Hinder Margo Holden Diana Hunt Aina Jaugietis Inge King Mildred Lovett Eileen McGrath Nancy Lyle Marguerite Mahood Heather Mason Daphne Mayo Dora Ohlfsen Ellen Payne Ieva Pocius Margaret Priest Norma Redpath Margaret Richardson Kathleen Shillam Margaret Sinclair Wendy Solling Eula Stagpoole Margaret Thomas Barbara Tribe Tina Wentcher Eleonore Lange

Women's Art Register members and artists who assisted with the 1978 project include Liz Coats, Isabel Davies, Jane Nemec, Carol Kirk Bryan, Ailsa O'Connor, Virginia Coventry.

STAND YOUR GROUND

ANNA SANDE

As indigenous people of this land seek to retain their histories, and settlers from elsewhere seem to be losing theirs, as digital convergence defies other than momentary individuality, and AI, bitcoin and blockchain march on while we look the other way – unique and palpable art and artifacts become more and more crucial to our meaningful survival as human beings.

Art feeds on its entrails like few other practices – it is crucial that the means to keep a grip on visual history survives in the wash of cultural turbulence and the multitude of contemporary forces competing for attention. In this maelstrom it is harder than ever to be brave and passionate, to stand your ground, as an individual rather than a 'stream' in the correct connected world.

Midst this haste and ephemera, revisiting the work of women artists of the last century may seem nothing short of terminally curious, odd. Yet that was where we looked in the 'last turmoil' – and there were found, midst wars and depression, the bravest of exemplars. Now it is forty years since their inspiration was gathered and archived, another groundswell looms, and their remarkable example and that which has coalesced around it, remains extraordinary and empowering.

Picture a sturdy woman at the apex of a ladder – for example – alongside the stout figure of what must be a notable personage, given his height and bulk and daunting material substance. This is Margaret Baskerville at work on Tommy Bent – the first professional woman sculptor in Victoria, very likely Australia, beating one of the 44 metal 'plates' that together form the more than twice life-size statue of Sir Thomas, 22nd Premier of Victoria (1904–09), Mayor of Brighton, 'one of the most colourful and corrupt politicians in Victorian history', former market-gardener, MLA for more then 32 years. This is Margaret Baskerville, pioneering scale and method: for the first time a bronze statue was being constructed using an oxyacetylene process.

A preparatory bronze-patinated plaster bust of Bent is also held by the Brighton City Council – remarkable for Baskerville's skill but also because it suggests the apparent humour of the woman atop the ladder, licks of hair on either side of the politician's head stand up like horns, of satyr or devil.

Prior to being awarded this significant commission Baskerville had worked for 16 years as an art teacher with the Education Department. She had also travelled to the UK to study and consolidate her skills – this daughter of an ironmonger cum tobacconist is not only an exemplar of significant visual skills, she is a beacon of determination who may be found in photographic form, atop her ladder, at the Carringbush Library Richmond, a foundation element of the earliest project of the Women's Art Register Extension Project (WAREP) – the *Profile of Australian Women Sculptors 1860–1960*, exhibited at the Mildura Sculpture Triennial, 1978.

As collaborator, with Bonita Ely, on this Women's Art Register Extension Project, and the person who asked of the Carringbush head librarian if the library would grant the project a physical space in its collection, I feel profound pleasure in seeing this particular early WAREP project taken up as catalyst and inspiration in the work of Julia Boros, recipient of the inaugural City of Yarra sponsored Women's Art Register residency project. What would Baskerville make of it: bronze and oxyacetylene, to text and photography, now a textile interpretation – vital, inspirational still, 106 years on.

The writer thanks Liz Coats for her helpful contribution to this short essay.

MEMORIES: WOMEN'S ART REGISTER EXTENSION PROJECT REVISITED

DR BONITA ELY

The invitation to write about establishing the Women's Art Register Extension Project (WAREP)[1] as it was known back in the 70s, is challenging. It's a while back, but, I acknowledge, important historically given the radical climate the Register was part of, and the huge support the project has received over time. Principally, the Carringbush Library's enlightened support of the project[2] enabled the dissemination of the material to schools, other organisations, and individual borrowers through the well established inter-library lending scheme. Without the library's supportive staff and protective infrastructures, I suspect the aims of WAREP may not have been realised.

Carringbush was ahead of its time – this support foreshadowed the community outreach services libraries now provide, their function stretching way beyond the free supply of books to borrowers as it was in the 70s.

Briefly, Anna Sande[3] and I successfully applied for funding from the Schools Commission Innovations Program for the research, collection, documentation and collation of material to address the dearth of information about historical and contemporary Australian women artists, to be made available to borrowers and schools through the inter-library lending scheme. For educational use. It was proposed that it be held in the Carringbush Library, Richmond, in collaboration with the George Paton and Ewing Galleries, Melbourne University, the key venue promoting innovation in contemporary art in 1970s Melbourne. Here, regular meetings for women artists were held, keeping all informed of WAREP's progress.

Reaching out to artists for documentation of their artworks with no selection criteria other than the artist's gender; documenting women's exhibitions; visiting artists' studios for interviews; photographing their works, built the collection. It introduced us to artists such as Mirka Mora, French survivor of the Holocaust. In her vast space on Hardware Lane, stacked up with her great artworks, benches piled high with the materials and memorabilia she drew from, we were fascinated, empowered by this artist's creativity and insights. This process was repeated over and over to capture the works of established but essentially neglected artists.

To increase public exposure to the research in 1978, we created a slide show and catalogue titled *Profile of Australian Women Sculptors 1860–1960* for exhibition in the Mildura Sculpture Triennial at the Mildura Arts Centre.

Institutions such as the Art Gallery of South Australia allowed us to document all the paintings by women in its collection. By this time, we were experts at camera on the tripod, lighting and framing up works in the camera's viewfinder, photographing in all conditions, recording details, cataloguing data – artist's name, artwork titles, mediums and dimensions, location – to be recorded on the slides and documents as they were collated into the Register's filing system, along with published information and references.

Ola Cohn studied with Henry Moore … hmmm … *The Fairies Tree* – surely there's more to Ola Cohn's oeuvre than this fanciful work?[4] We were delighted to find her Modernist sculptures preserved in the little known Ola Cohn Centre in what had been stables, then her studio and home, now a gathering place and home for the Melbourne Society of Women Painters and Sculptors.[5] Our research of women artists such as Cohn was accompanied by women artists' writings.

I scoured every publication of the magazine, *Art and Australia*[6], for essays by and about women artists, for examples of their artworks, to be photocopied, catalogued and filed. It emerged Margaret Preston was a prolific writer and advocate for an identifiably Australian approach to the visual arts.

Not content to depict shearers and gum trees, Preston researched wide-ranging idioms and non-European cultures to inform her evolving ideas, travelling to China, Africa, as well as Paris, London, and perhaps most importantly, Outback Australia, where she learnt about Indigenous peoples' cultural forms. She was the first white Australian artist to appreciate and quote Aboriginal artists' distinctive ochre palette and patternings.

In China and Japan she absorbed the axonomic perspective of Asian art, the flattening and assemblage of spatially defining shapes and line, where the viewer is placed within the image rather than outside looking in as with one and two point perspective. In other words, she went to the sources of cultural influence to analyse cultural forms in depth, not just copying, towards evolving her distinctive, innovative practice.

It became obvious that Australian women artists of the early twentieth century were active agents in the radicalisation of Australian art despite the country's cultural insularity and bigotry maintained by the 'White Australia' Policy[7]. Artists such as Margaret Preston, Sybil Craig, Grace Cossington-Smith, Thea Proctor, Dorrit Black, Grace Crowley were travelling, studying and mingling with Modernist artists in Paris and London, bringing back home fresh ideas – Post-Impressionism, colour theory, Abstraction – to challenge traditional Australian art.

Meanwhile, our contemporaries were enthusiastically participating and contributing to the collection. I am so happy and thankful that subsequent people have taken on the administration of WAREP, now WAR (most appropriately still), and have successfully maintained and expanded the resources to now.

So, so great.

1. The Women's Art Register was created by Kiffy Rubbo, Director, and Meredith Rogers, curator, at Melbourne University's George Paton and Ewing Galleries after Lucy Lippard delivered a lecture there on a similar enterprise in New York — the on-going collection of information about past and present women artists who invariably had been overlooked in art history, and ignored, devalued, by the contemporary art scene.
2. Now the Richmond Library. Anna Sande asked the Head Librarian for this access. She said — 'Yes'.
3. Also known in the context of WAREP as Anna Havana.
4. *The Fairies Tree* is located in the Fitzroy Gardens, Melbourne, created for Victoria's children and the Centenary Year, 1934.
5. Ola Cohn Centre, 43 Gipps St, East Melbourne.
6. Launched in 1916 by artist and publisher, Sydney Ure Smith, Margaret Preston contributed 27 articles to the *Art and Australia* magazine, Australia's first publication focusing on contemporary art.
7. The Immigration Restriction Act 1901, legislated by the new Commonwealth of Australia, restricted, prevented, the entry of Asian people and Southern Pacific Islanders into Australia by applying a European language test most unlikely to be passed by English speaking, non-white applicants.

EXHIBITION VENUES

Level 1, Richmond Town Hall
333 Bridge Road, Richmond

Richmond Library
415 Church Street, Richmond

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Women's Art Register acknowledges the traditional owners of the land on which we meet and work, the Wurundjeri people of the Eastern Kulin Nation. We also wish to acknowledge the Yarra City Arts Exhibition program, and the City of Yarra Annual Grants program, for their support of this project, and for their longstanding partnership with the Women's Art Register. Julia Boros wishes to thank Caroline Phillips, Dr Katve-Kaisa Kontturi, Anna Sande, Dr Bonita Ely, Sahra Martin, Julia Raath, Kerri McConchie, Tara van Huizen and Richmond and Burnley Historical Society.

Images

Cover: Julia Boros, *Unknown Hands*, 2019, print paste on naturally dyed paper. Image by Tim Gresham.

Internal: Julia Boros, *Untitled*, 2019, screenprinted fabric and paper, Unknown Hands film positive. Image by Tim Gresham. Julia Boros printing at Sunshine Print Artspace. Image by Julia Raath. *Škola Kreslení*, A. L. Salać, 1940, Minerva. Cover of the *Profile of Australian Women Sculptors 1860–1960*.

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