



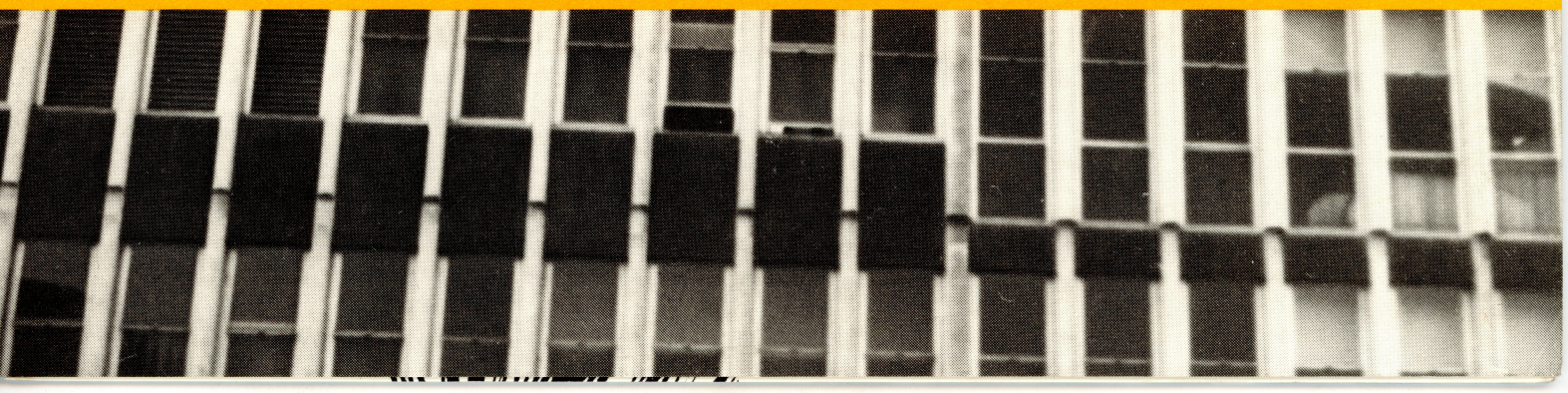
Howard Arkley

CASUAL WORKS

Working Drawings, Source Material, Doodles

1974 - 1987

Thursday 5 May - Saturday 28 May 1988



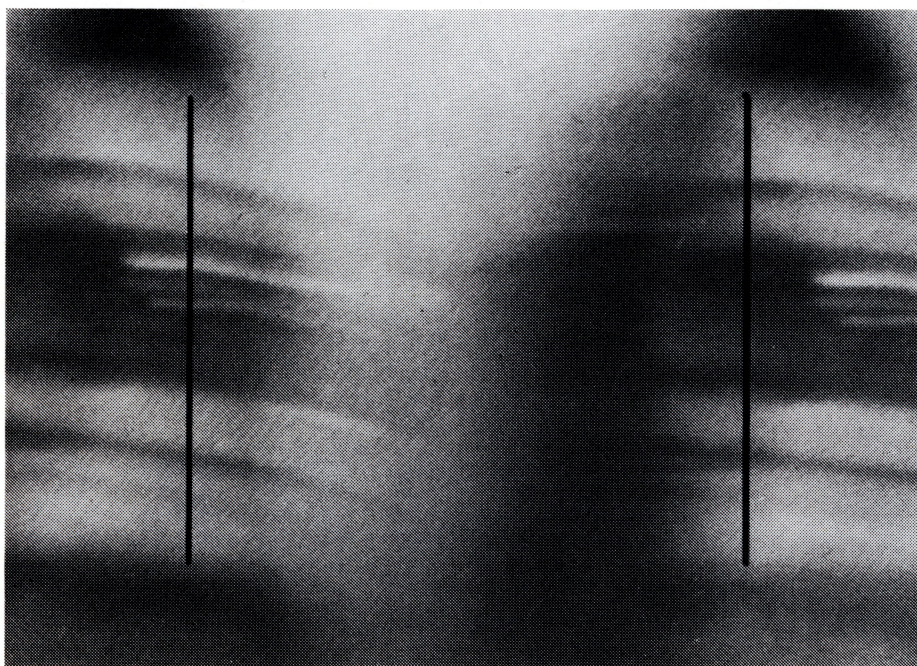
Art in the Urban Environment



There is an exhibition which is unashamedly narrative in its design, yet which distorts the ordering tendency of the retrospective format.* Howard Arkley has chosen works from the past 13 years to represent particular moments in his work. Yet each of these is revealed in re/pro/repro-duction, a black-and-white filtering operation that mimics both the finished painting and the working drawing: Arkley has reproduced his own paintings as drawings. A retrospective of new work. Rather than seeing this merely as some kind of artistic conceit, these works have become part of Arkley's immediate environment, and if his work tells a story, it is a story of the obsessive transcription of culture. (Arkley's response to this suggestion was to stress

What is emphasised above all else in this exhibition is the importance of the cultural fragment in Arkley's approach to art. At the risk of expounding clichés, Arkley is a prime example of the artist whose art and life are absolutely inseparable, because his art is taken directly from everyday experience. The real narrative to be read in this show is to be read *across* rather than along his work, one which leads from soap powder packaging, television, computers, the language of the pinball parlour, i.e. *popular culture*, to doodles, drawings and paintings: from cultural ingestion to finished work. The small quantity of peripheral material presented here belies the enormous volume that is collected, sifted, altered, copied and absorbed in the process of formulating new work. Images and ideas from magazines, books, toys, television, scientific literature, horror films, art history and the media, in other words the entire archive of society, are distilled and recirculated in his paintings. By a process of iteration, the initial ideas, objects and images undergo a transition to the final work.

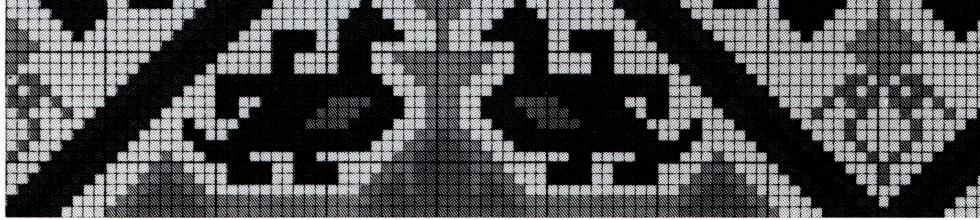
The inclusion of Arkley's paraphernalia only hints at the obsessiveness that leads this artist to draw over printed material (books, maps, etc.), walls, serviettes, beer coasters, any surface at hand. The mutual relationship between these fragments and the finished works is emphasised in the *Primitive Paintings* (1982) where the doodles have been copied onto the canvas as an all-over field, and the *Cacti/Succulents* series (1984) where individual doodles become the inspiration for entire paintings. Arkley refers to his doodles as 'casual art'; he has a book for all occasions: a 'tram book', a 'pub book' and so on. Arkley produces his doodles by a process similar to the surrealists' attempts at 'automatic writing'. Afterwards he goes through the books, selecting particularly powerful images and transferring them onto canvas (a process remarkably similar to the one he used to produce the methodical and measured *White Paintings* (1974), where the carefully prepared white ground was 'spontaneously' marked with black spray paint. Very few survived the selection process. This is a typical Arkley trait, almost random actions tempered with absolute care and precision. The resulting paintings are perplexing jumbles of shapes that can be freely interpreted. Arkley likes this ambiguity, which he carried over to his narrative *Urban Paintings* (1983) (*Felony* for example). Similarly, key turning points in his work have occurred accidentally or by force of circumstance.



that it was more a reaction to his embarrassment at the entire notion of having a retrospective, a desire to short-circuit this by the reconstruction of past work as drawings in the present.)

* Much has been written about the museum as the institution which orders meaning. Of all art's devices and events, the retrospective is surely the one whose structuring of meaning most closely resembles that of the museum. The retrospective binds a proper name to a selected, 'representative' collection of artworks and invites us to impose a homogenous, linear order upon their interpretation. We get to 'know' the work, we can see the mechanism at work behind the canvas, we read the narrative of serial progression, the development of a language of forms and images: the artist's *oeuvre*.





The most obvious thing to note about Arkley's work is the absence of brushwork. His adherence to the airbrush has the effect of depersonalising the marks he makes on the canvas. In the *White Paintings* the airbrush was used as a formal device where the rigour of hard-edged minimalist geometry was counter-balanced by the spontaneous gesture, a ghostly mist of black over the carefully prepared white ground. The coincidental but remarkable resemblance of *Tracing (Liquid)* (1974) to chromosome stains might have suggested the mutation that saw the dramatic introduction of colour, and the use of airbrush now suggested an equivalence of his paintings with the cultural products that are so much a part of his work. Patterns from clothing, packaging, laminex tabletops, etc., were to be found in the *Panel* series (1979). Like the products that inspired these works, Arkley's paintings are all surface, the aesthetic of the supermarket. The panel series enacts the circulation of mass culture in its references to Kandinsky, Op Art, Vorticism, psychedelia and so on. This process of reference and iteration is analogous to the production of chaotic behaviour in mathematics. *Paisley* (1979) bears a strong resemblance to computer-synthesised images of the borders between stability and chaos, characteristics common to all of Arkley's work. The appropriation of surfaces from functional objects suggested that the art could emulate their functionality: from canvasses that took their shapes from the objects that inspired them, to lamps, carpets, clothing and furniture.

A series of head paintings or portraits (largely derived from breakfast cereal packaging, tribal masks, toy masks and images from magazines) culminated in the *Tattoo* series (1983) where the surfaces from commercial/industrial culture were overlaid upon the body as cultural object. The

image is a powerful one which suggests the inseparability of art and life. Like the process of tattooing, the art is neither inside nor outside the body but trapped in the defining surface itself. Here the surface/depth opposition is brought to the fore.

An initial fascination with computer games in the late seventies had led to the breakdown of his painted surfaces into coloured dots, as in a cathode-ray tube, an extreme form of pointillism, but, of course, motivated from pop rather than from impressionism. A similar operation is in effect in works like the *Urban Paintings* series (1983), where the interiors of objects are filled by the visual surfaces of everyday life (analogous to the use of Arkley's own imagery in the *Tattoo* series). The space-filling technique he used in *Suburban Exterior* (1983) again suggests the dense patterning of dot-matrix computer images. In *Urban Interior* (1983), a perspective view of a room (totally synthesised from department store catalogues) is painted in outline on a sheet of wallpaper, decorating the walls, floor and, not insignificantly, a painting on the rear wall, a microcosm of the suggestion that all of Arkley's work makes: that painting/art is inseparable from and not superior to, the everyday object: art as wallpaper.

The *Urban Paintings* series also saw a strong shift away from field painting towards the narrative world of the dramatic scene. The moody *film noir* feel of *Suicide* (1983), with its references to the constructed world of the detective film, its surface in glowing neon over an almost abstract expressionist background, suggested a shift to the sensuous and mysterious.

Suburban Interior and *Suburban Exterior* provided the departure point for exploring what Arkley calls the texture of suburban life. A shift to the architectural is apparent from *Tudor House* (1986), a study based on a miniature town in the Fitzroy Gardens. Arkley is currently working on a streetscape of suburban imagery, and also plans a study of the creatively vacuous buildings that are dominating the Melbourne cityscape, particularly along St. Kilda Road.

But the Arkley mood is perhaps best captured in *Fast* (1986), a larger-than-life comic strip, a metaphor for his entire project, where the artificial textures of pop culture, the constructions of industry and history, the cheap effects of horror and the 'reality' of mass media collide in an explosion of candy floss, flesh and plastic.

Richard Brown
Melbourne, April 1988

All Teeth and

Everybody knows someone like that. The kind of person who, on seeing the neat mask on the back of the Cornflakes packet (hey, great idea), cuts it out, actually PUNCHES THROUGH the perforated holes, ties string through either end and puts the mask on. The rest of us just think about doing it.



Some people just never clean up under the bed. Will you look at this place?

The studio was not merely cluttered but abandoned. It was deserted by method. Organisation had checked out a long time ago. Drawings, sketches, cartoons emerge from clouds of dust on a 32°C Indian summer day. Relics are exposed, crumbling, to the daylight.

– These are really lovely, look at this stuff, you should take care of it.

– Mmmmm.

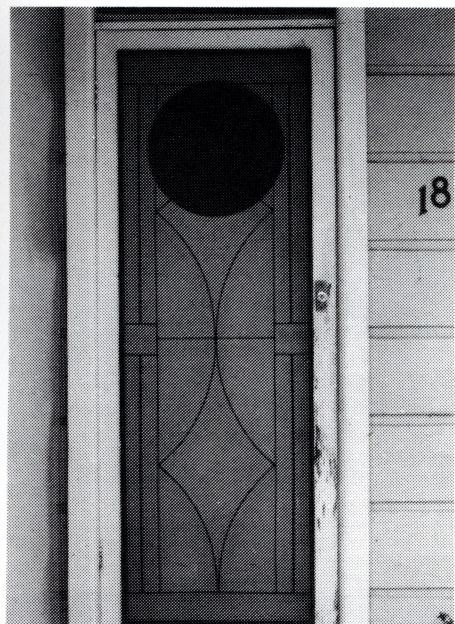
It's not that these things are priceless (I refuse to talk about the treasures of memory), but that they too have the right to . . . hang around.

It all comes in handy some day, and who can say just when you might need some of this stuff.

– Now, WHERE is that thing, I know I put it someplace . . .

Laid bare is the impulse to draw, the mad flurry of activity that precedes the designation of the work; the naming of the object. Often it takes all the same moves to get there, but each time in a slightly different order, and now an order altered by the passage of time.

Dislocated from time and context, each of Howard Arkley's series is re-constructed in News-Reel black and white, old but not aged, they are as pristine as a colourised 1940s film. And to tell the rest of the story, the toys of the past come out to play.



Hunger

I'd like to talk about the black and white flashback, the seriousness of times past, but the lewdly winking colour of the chattering objects that surround these oversize journal pages make me pause. And take a breath.

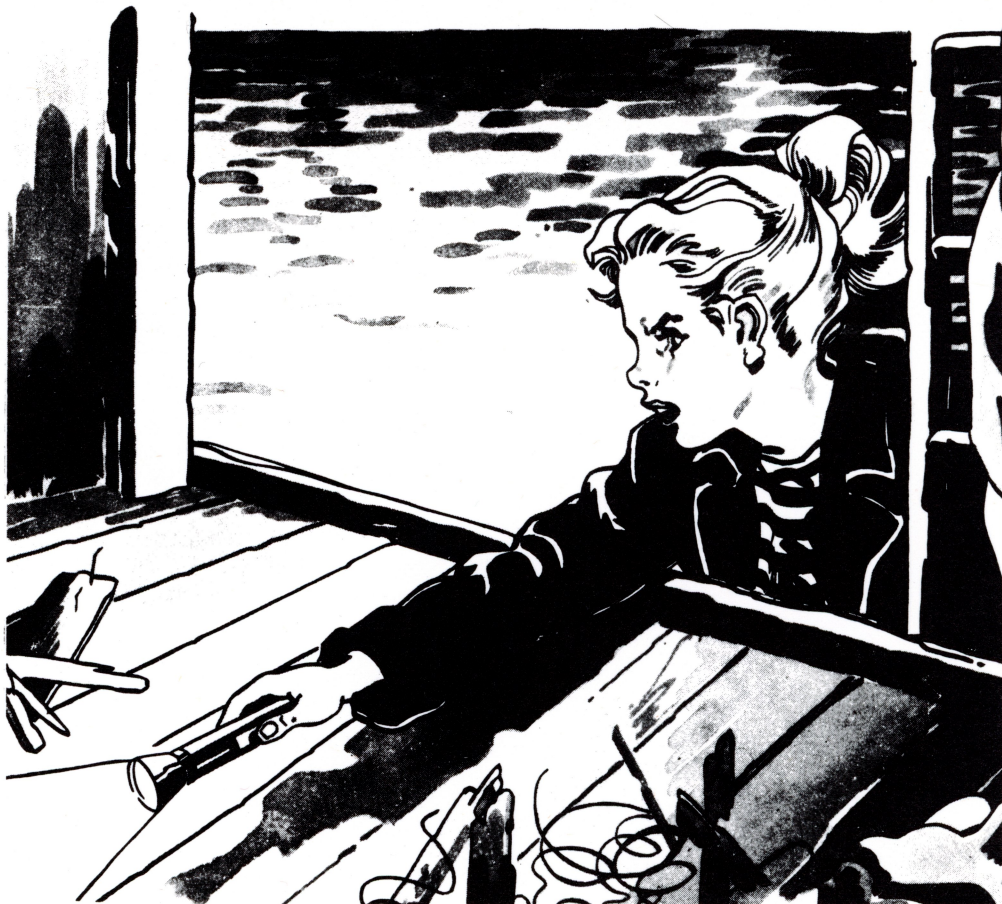
There's something cannibalistic about this way of proceeding, this reconstruction of self. The artist goes through the same motions. The artist feeds from the memory of ideas. It reminds me of those kids who suffer from that self-mutilative disorder, the disease that has them tearing and eating at themselves until they are tied down, and they then relax; the involuntary spasms pass.

Is this just another kind of self-consuming art?

Or are we supposed to talk about re-representing history.

- No, I have to do these again because the originals are such a bloody mess.

Crowded in by their past incarnations, no-one can say which of these objects existed first, and ignoring those eager to fix the Source, the entire problem is almost immaterial. I don't want to have to say that no work can return to the original. And I do recall the Machine of Creativity, that eats ideas at one end and belches art at the other. And I know what teleology means. It's just that in this case it all becomes a little confounded. Or at least just as murky. Where was I?



Shining her torch, Dixie looked inside then gasped with horror. The chums' hideout had been completely wrecked.

Talk about telling tales.

All revelations should be this intimate.

This way of working - the mad grab of the old junk and the new objects, the sifting of ideas along with the leggo-pile of assorted passions; it hacks at the notion of Works in Progress, and replaces it with Now Where IS That Thing.

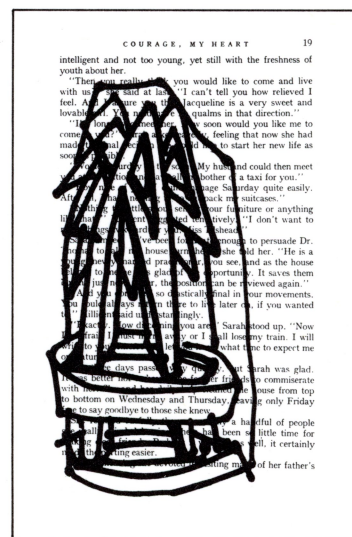
It all comes back to control. The stuff that crams your bottom draw can be dragged out and thrown down on the floor of the Public Space, but in re-ordering and re-naming the clutter, the Past becomes your own, the genealogy of the language is explained - the words and the work are of your own doing. You call a spade a spade, and a brush a spray gun, change the words when speaking about it (they call it idiosyncrasy) and obscure its past. Out of History emerges Identity, and who can tell the difference.

"So Jimmy grew up proud, lonely and mean-tempered, a lean stick of a young man, hands full of the saxophone, like a priest holding a trollope - that's what Martin said once, and Jimmy flashed him that shark's grin, all teeth and hunger. But he got a job playing in a place on Clinton Avenue, in 1938, and they only threw him out because he played so hectic."

David Thomson, SUSPECTS 1985

Virginia Trioli

Melbourne, April 1988



Arkley Through the Kaleidoscope: A Selected Biography

1951: Born in Melbourne.

1966: Saw first art exhibition, Sidney Nolan's *Ned Kelly Series*, at the Science Museum, Melbourne.

1968: Saw *The Field* exhibition of contemporary abstract art.

1969: Saw Ti Parks' work at Tolarno Galleries, Melbourne.

1969-72: Diploma of Art and Design, Prahran College of Advanced Education, Melbourne.

1973: Diploma of Education, Melbourne State College.

1974: Held first exhibition of the intense and rigorous *White Paintings* at Tolarno Galleries, Melbourne.

1976: Held two subsequent exhibitions of the white paintings at Coventry Gallery, Sydney and Tolarno Galleries, Melbourne.

1976: Awarded the Alliance Francaise Art Fellowship. Spent the following twelve months travelling in Europe and the U.S. Evolved "Hotel Art", a casual, alternative method of working ... a response to the transient environment of the cafe/hotel room. Began photographing doorways.

1977: Returned to Australia. Continued documentation of suburban doors. Encountered the contemporary feminist debate. Exhibited at Coventry Gallery, Sydney. This series of paintings was non-compositional, coloured, self-conscious, referring to declared aesthetic preferences – Op Art, Kinetic Art, English Vorticism.

1979: Exhibited the *Pattern paintings* – "art by the metre" – at Tolarno Galleries, Melbourne.

1981: Held an exhibition of paintings and "functional objects" – chairs, tables, rugs – at Tolarno Galleries, Melbourne. Completed the Painted Tram commission for the Victorian Ministry for the Arts, Melbourne. Transformed the Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane into an all-over Arkley environment. Featured in Paul Taylor's article "Australian New Wave and the Second Degree", ART & TEXT No. 1. Participated in *Australian Perspecta 1981*, Art Gallery of New South Wales.



1982: Executed a twenty-five foot long paper mural – a giant doodle – to exhibit at the Prahran College Gallery, Melbourne. Its popular appeal encouraged the further development of "casual art" into the *Primitive paintings*. Participated in *Popism*, curated by Paul Taylor, National Gallery of Victoria.

1983: Exhibited the *Urban paintings* – images derived from popular, urban culture – at Tolarno Galleries, Melbourne and Roslyn Oxley9, Sydney. Participated in *A Melbourne Mood: Cool, Contemporary Art*, curated by Daniel Thomas, Australian National Gallery, Canberra. Exhibited *Tattooed* in *Vox Pop*, curated by Robert Lindsay, National Gallery of Victoria.

1984: Exhibited the *Cacti/Succulents series* – urban domestic still lifes – at Roslyn Oxley9, Sydney.

1985: Exhibited a series of *Head paintings* – "portraits" derived from altered images of mass media/advertising.

1986: Collaborated with Howard Raggatt in *Five Artists – Five Architects*, Ewing and George Paton Galleries, Melbourne. Developed new interest in architectural subjects. Held a highly successful exhibition at Tolarno Galleries, Melbourne – a compendium of styles and concerns, overlapping past and present – still lifes, patterns, pop images, buildings, narrative dramas.

1987: Exhibited the *Urban/Suburban series* – houses and high rise – at Roslyn Oxley9, Sydney.

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Incorporating Gertrude Street Artists Spaces,
200 Gertrude Street, Fitzroy 3065. Telephone (03) 419 3406.

Director: Louise Neri.

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