

The artist's scholarship is a lesson in staying true to vision

BARRY PEARCE

Beyond the dazzle of his meteoric rise and fall, more attention has been paid to the persona of Brett Whiteley as an exploiter of extraordinary talent than the underlying foundation of his work ethic. Yet he once said that if one of the purposes of life was to know oneself, then a great deal of time would need to be spent simply "investigating" things.

Indeed, the planets were aligned early in his career when, aged 20, he was awarded an Italian Government Travelling Art Scholarship for 1960, allowing him to do just that in an expanded world. The research required to match those he admired most was a process he carried out with formidable visual intelligence, and the scholarship was a perfect opportunity to sate his curiosity aroused until then only by postcards and book illustrations, plus a few local painters. In two dynamic moves, from Sydney to Italy, then to London, his paradigms were set in place, impelling him forward with an inspired impatience.

Maximising his creative potential was the essential mission. A great learner, he left no stone unturned once he got to Europe in 1960. And so, in some ways, to the end of his life, he remained the eternal student.

Two outstanding recipients of the scholarship before him similarly grasped the opportunity to test themselves against the international context: Donald Friend, inaugural winner in 1951, and Sidney Nolan in 1956. Friend stayed in Assisi, Florence and Venice the following year and produced some of his most beautiful figure drawings in tune with the Italian masters whose works he would have looked at.

In October 1952 there was a joint exhibition with Friend and Nolan at Macquarie Galleries in Sydney. Who knows, with the former ensconced in Europe, perhaps this fed into Nolan's ambition to leave Australia in 1953. He had his own encounters with Italy during this year, leading to his Italian scholarship that helped secure a studio at the Villa Giulia in Rome.

Whiteley's benefit from early forays on the Italian peninsula was far more long term than either of those two. The warm dusty patinas of ancient walls, churches in Rome and Florence, and the palattes and pictorial devices of Trecento and early Renaissance painters became indelibly embedded in his language. Even now, through a warp of time, we can stand before a later ochre-toned painting by him and sense the excitement he and his lover Wendy Julius had felt at the Louvre in 1960 coming across Giotto's St Francis receiving the stigmata against a flat, muted gold sky with a suite of three small predellas about the saint's life ranged across the bottom of the composition.

One of many luminaries who caught his attention at the time was Nicolas de Stael, a Russian-born French painter whose simple shapes and astute articulation of the picture plane echoed with heavier impasto the abstractions of Englishman William Scott, whom Whiteley would soon meet in London.

Three decades on, at the opening of an exhibition by Whiteley in Sydney in 1990, he and John Olsen had an intense discussion. Whiteley was gesturing with the flat palms of his hands facing outwards, moving them sideways and up and down like Marcel Marceau tracing the illusion of a vertical sheet of glass. When later asked, Olsen declared that Whiteley was



NEWSCORP AUSTRALIA

Where did Brett Whiteley's relentless, addictive determination come from?

WHITELEY'S LEGACY: FOREVER LEARNING

describing de Stael's allegiance to the flat surface, but commented how at the same time Brett often sought to imbue the picture plane with a sense of deep space. A pictorial dilemma from Whiteley's Italian scholarship thus stayed alive in his mind for 30 years.

Eighteen months earlier, Whiteley had written to his mentor, Lloyd Rees, then close to dying: "What I learned from you was to be influenced by everyone, and to extract out of everything I looked at and every corner I went around the 'critical mass' and to put it in my critical pile, my optical repertoire, later to be amalgamated, and dealt out like a hummingbird with honey."

Where did this relentless, addictive determination, this hunger to comprehend and conquer visual canons past and present come from, even sometimes against his own instinct? Given the opportunity through scholarships to study abroad, it is not simply the experience itself that matters so

much as the extent of an inner combustion already waiting within young artists to be catalysed by their discoveries and standards they set for themselves.

Whiteley became aware of the entry period for the next Italian scholarship while working for the advertising agency Lintas. Russell Drysdale was the judge, and partly because of his admiration for Drysdale as a painter, Whiteley was not sure of his chances. He was encouraged to enter by a family friend, artist-illustrator William Pidgeon, and above all, Wendy.

There were 14 contenders, including the substantially established John Coburn, Robert Dickerson and Margo Lewers. Whiteley had the presence — we cannot believe it was entirely coincidental — to present a group of semi-abstract paintings based on landscape near old gold mining towns discovered by Drysdale and Friend in 1947. And the colours Whiteley used were straight from

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the palette of Drysdale, then in 1959 at the absolute peak of his reputation. The key work was the largest, *Around Bathurst*, painted that year after Whiteley left Lintas to prepare his entries.

Whiteley departed Sydney on board the ship *Oceania* in late January 1960, arriving in Naples a month later, and lived in Rome. The plan was for Wendy to join him in June. They would meet in Paris, then return to Florence to settle there for the remainder of the 10-month period of the scholarship. The rest is history.

The prodigious ascent of Whiteley lifted dramatically when Bryan Robertson fell in love with his work and included it in the *Recent Australian Painting* exhibition organised for the Whitechapel Gallery in London in 1961. From this point, the remainder of the decade in London became a dizzy ride of pop-star acclaim: through awards, prizes and further scholarships, solo exhibitions in Australia, London and New York including

association with international agent Marlborough, all the while working feverishly through *Abstraction*, *Bathroom*, *Christie*, *Zoo* and *Landscape* themes that never failed to make collectors and critics sit up.

And even though a Harkness Fellowship in New York near the end of the decade became something of a shipwreck, his momentum remained unwavering and his drawing a steady undercurrent. He returned to Sydney in late 1969 and soon flew even higher on his rediscovery of the Australian landscape and elegiac possibilities of Sydney Harbour above the sinister underplay of a growing addiction to heroin that would eventually destroy his marriage and his life.

And so, we may well feel, in light of such a spectacle of success, that as an exemplar of the Italian scholarship, or indeed its heir in the scholarship that now bears his name, Whiteley was an impossible act to follow. But we should con-

sider that if he had never been awarded it in the first place, he would probably have found a way of bursting through, charming and conquering all before him.

The most interesting aspect of the Brett Whiteley Travelling Art Scholarship, established by Beryl seven years after her son's death in 1992, is how quickly the art world has changed. In the 1950s, when the term contemporary art was referred to, it was almost exclusively about painting and sculpture, and there was a singular, logical lineage going back to the Trecento painters of Italy.

Now, unfortunately, Italy no longer holds centre of attention for the average contemporary artist. With provincial boundaries dissolving, young aspirants to a Whiteley Scholarship may well go to Paris initially, since a studio is on offer, and inevitably consider other paradigms in New York, Berlin, Mexico City, even Beijing and Shanghai. The most important leaf they may still take from the experience of Whiteley, however, is that whichever map they choose to follow, they should take care never to abandon completely the basic trope of their own voice.

Barry Pearce is emeritus curator of Australian art at the Art Gallery of NSW. This is an edited extract of his catalogue essay for *The Whiteley at 20: Twenty Years of the Brett Whiteley Travelling Art Scholarship*, showing at Sydney's SH Erwin Gallery from Friday until May 5.



Nine years before his Archibald prize, Ben Quilty won the 2002 Brett Whiteley Travelling Art Scholarship



Five years before his Archibald win, Mitch Cairns took out the Whiteley scholarship in 2012



Last year's winner of the Brett Whiteley Travelling Art Scholarship was Natasha Walsh, as judged by Ben Quilty

Identity issues are front of mind

DANCE

Dance Massive
Make Your Own World.
Lucy Guerin Inc. Arts
House, North Melbourne
Town Hall, March 15.

Skeleton Tree
Stephanie Lake
Company, Malthouse
Theatre, Melbourne,
March 17.

EAMONN KELLY

Reflecting Melbourne's resilient contemporary dance subculture, the fifth instalment of the biennial Dance Massive festival offers an abundant program and a host of premieres.

Creating dance is often a slow and risky process, involving numerous stages of concept development, workshop and rehearsal. In this context, the festival's periodic return has proved a powerful focal point for established companies and independent choreographers: nothing channels the artistic mind like a deadline and the knowledge that one's creative efforts will be shielded commercially within a diverse dance panoply that attracts an adventurous audience.

Embracing this opportunity, established choreographers Lucy Guerin and Stephanie Lake lead their companies into distinct existential landscapes: Guerin traversing tensions between collective and individual identities in *Make Your Own World* while, in *Skeleton Tree*, Lake creates allegorical drama by peering into experiences of death and loss. As with many of this year's offerings, identity issues permeate both works.

Familiar tropes of conformity, resistance and independence propel Guerin's new work. Notionally abstract sequences that alternate between uniform groupings and spontaneous individual breakaways hammer home the message. These are interspersed with competitive tribal engagements — the mime vocabulary of which is anthropological, whether by appropriation from sport, war dance traditions or primal territorial gestures — that mirror, rather than amplify, the human condition.

The tussle between nebulous passages seemingly born of workshop extemporisation and formal, meticulously synchronised geometric work marks something of a shift in Guerin's recent practice. The result, although purposeful and moody, lacks sustained expressive or intellectual trajectories.

Confronting and poetic, *Skeleton Tree* stitches together 13 dance incantations inspired by Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds' pared-back 2016 album. Unifying themes of longing, compulsion, exertion and release emerge gradually through a winding metanarrative. Whirling virtuosos of ecstasy, anguish and propulsion give way to trios in which inventive folding, curling and rolling sequences see bodies fuse, strain and transform. At times the syntax amplifies vitality, with breath and the beating of limbs attesting to life force. Elsewhere, death is evoked, with movement drawn from embalming rituals or efforts to reanimate — through embrace and assisted gesture — one who has recently departed.

Dance Massive ends Sunday.

YOUR NATIONAL CULTURE GUIDE

NOW SHOWING

Pimped (MA15+)
The realisation that each sex has its strengths, weaknesses, rights, wrongs and mysteries is at the core of the psychosexual thriller *Pimped*, the feature film debut of David Barker, who wrote the script with Lou Mentor. That opening scene ends with a tall, dark, handsome man closing a door on some debauchery that he has organised. He lights a cigarette. He seems to be a pimp. We then move to the day and night that take up the rest of the movie. An attractive young woman, Sarah, is sleeping in her apartment. A raven-haired woman, Rachel, nudges her awake. Sarah (Ella Scott Lynch) does doll up and go to a bar,

where she meets Lewis (Benedict Samuel). Something repugnant happens to Sarah, but not only to her. There is a chain of events. There are multiple twists and shocks involving the nature of the characters and what happens to them. Veteran actors Heather Mitchell and Lewis Fitz-Gerald turn up and they take the story into even darker places.

STEPHEN ROMEI ★★☆☆

NSW

EXHIBITION

Wildlife Photographer of the Year
An exhibition of work from the London Natural History

Museum's 54th Wildlife Photographer of the Year competition is touring the country, featuring 100 finalists from more than 50,000 international submissions.
National Maritime Museum. 2 Murray Street, Sydney. Daily, 9.30pm-5pm. Tickets: \$12-\$20. Inquiries: (02) 9298 3777. Until August 25.

QUEENSLAND

STAGE

Demi Lardner: Ditch Witch 800
Directed by Michelle Brasier, Australian comedian Demi Lardner (pictured right) performs their show *Ditch Witch 800* as part of the Brisbane Comedy Festival.
Brisbane Powerhouse. Rooftop Terrace, 119 Lamington Street, New Farm. Tonight-Sat, 8.15pm; Sun, 7.15pm. Tickets: \$24-\$29. Bookings: (07) 3358 8600 or online.



SOUTH AUSTRALIA

STAGE

Animal Farm
George Orwell's novel *Animal Farm* has been reimagined by Georgie Brookman and Renato Musolino, the latter performing as all characters. Written as a response to the rise of authoritarian governments

during the 1940s, the story follows the goings-on at Manor Farm under the leadership of rebellious pigs. Presented by State Theatre Company South Australia.
Adelaide Festival Centre. Space Theatre, King William Street. Tonight, 7pm. Tickets: \$34-\$66. Inquiries: 131 246 or online. Until March 30. Duration: 1hr 25min.

NORTHERN TERRITORY

EXHIBITION

Tjungunutja: From Having Come Together
This exhibition presents early Papunya paintings, curated by one of the movements founding artists, Long Jack Phillipus Tjakamarra, alongside Bobby West Tjupurrula, Michael Nelson Jagamarra, Joseph Jurrak Tjapaltjarri, Luke Scholes

and Kumanytjayi Anderson. Originally exhibited in 2017, *Tjungunutja: From Having Come Together* now presents three new pieces, historical ephemera and unpublished photographs.
Araluen Arts Centre. 61 Larapinta Drive, Araluen. Daily, 10am-4pm. Tickets: \$6-\$8. Inquiries: (08) 8951 1120 or online. Until June 2.

TASMANIA

EXHIBITION

Grace Herbert: Increase Productivity
Grace Herbert investigates themes of control through body composition assessment technology. Herbert was selected for the Shotgun program, which offers artists production assistance and industry access.
Contemporary Art Tasmania. 27 Tasma Street, North Hobart. Wed-Sun, 12-5pm. Free event. Inquiries: (03) 6231 0445 or online. Until April 2.

WESTERN AUSTRALIA

MUSIC

Selfless Orchestra: Great Barrier
Perth-based post-rock orchestra Selfless performs a live score to a video installation at the Fremantle Arts Centre. The group, featuring musicians from the Perth Symphony Orchestra and other contemporary acts on pianos, strings, drums, guitars and vocals, performs its immersive work *Great Barrier*, which explores the plight of the Great Barrier Reef. This work seeks to reimagine traditional expectations of music and art. Part of the proceeds from this event and records sold will be donated to Frontline Action Against Coal and Reef Restoration Foundation.
Fremantle Arts Centre. Inner Courtyard, 1 Finnelly Street, Fremantle. Saturday, 6pm. Tickets: \$28.60. Inquiries: (08) 9432 9555 or online. Duration: 4hr.

VICTORIA

FESTIVAL

Rebetiko Greek
Combining Folk, Sephardic, Turkish and Byzantine music, Rebetiko music celebrates the past and present of Greece. This festival includes acts such as Atsushi Tookaya, Melbourne Rebetiko Ensemble, Polyxeni Melbourne, Mandolins of Smyrne, Alphington Grammar Band, Dean Georgalas and Aggie Giotsidis.
Melbourne Recital Centre. 31 Start Street, Southbank. Saturday, 3pm. Tickets: \$55-\$69. Bookings: (03) 9699 3333 or online.

Edited by Sophia Morrison
Full reviews of new films will appear in *The Weekend Australian* on Saturday

Send event information to listings@theaustralian.com.au