

**Artist Talk by Christine McCormack
West Gallery Thebarton, 29 May 2021**

***Timeline* | Richard Spoehr and Dora Chapman
The Nirvana of Un-Named Things | Christine McCormack**

1. Dora

I'll begin with a recent statement sent to me from Richard Spoehr who was Dora's nephew.

"My show with Dora is very much a personal reconciliation with her - both emotionally and personally - although she is not there physically." Dora passed away in 1995.

Life is about recognising truths - truths that often lay hidden within us all - we need to journey through the dark and often misunderstood parts of our own lives to find these hidden jewels -these points of enlightenment.

"Timeline" is the reconciliation, not only between Dora and Richard, involving that all too human story of differing opinions and temperaments building a wall between people - it is also a reconciliation between the two ways of expression through different mediums, so that they become one continuous dialogue between colour and substance. Or "colour made solid," as Maddie Reece who opened this exhibition, recently observed after seeing the works installed here for the first time.

Dora's colour-drenched series evolved from her knowledge of colour theory and from the extensive teaching of colour gradation and colour and tonal exercises given to her students at the Art School. They began for her as simple geometric colour exercises in gouache and progressed on to the portraits. However, Dora, ever the perfectionist was unhappy with the unevenness displayed by the gouache when it dried - she turned to screen printing as a total flatness of colour could be achieved through skillful printmaking techniques which offered full saturation of colour density from the printing inks involved.

Dora had been given a silk screen, her personal choice of a retirement gift, when she left her teaching job at the South Australian School of Art. She then became more involved with it as she continued to teach a night class after retirement on a Wednesday evening, while Richard looked after Jim. (James Cant, her husband and well-known Artist.) By then, Jim was suffering from Multiple Sclerosis and his movements were limited and he needed care at home.

Richard had entered Dora's life around that time (1969 - early 1970) as the young nephew who had grown up in Dora's childhood home, seeing her artworks on the walls there and knowing she was a well-known artist -but that she had become estranged from the rest of her family. So he had never met her -and the intrigue of this was a magnet to someone with artistic sensibilities, who was then questioning his own place in life as a young person, searching for identity.

Dora and Jim lived an aesthetic life, completely devoted to each other and their own art practices. They lived in their own world, quite isolated from family connections. Years before, they had lived and travelled extensively in Europe and the UK. and mixed with many well-known artists while over there. Back in Adelaide, they would have been perceived by conservative society as living a "bohemian artistic life".

Dora was experienced with students, but not immediate family and familial things. While initially cautious when first meeting Richard, as he had sought her out and initiated the contact, Dora and Jim quickly welcomed Richard into their lives and he became a regular visitor, helping both Dora and Jim. They in turn, became valued mentors to Richard, encouraging him in his artistic pursuits and widening those horizons that had previously been claustrophobic.

Dora wasn't an easily adaptable person - she needed to control, it upset her to relinquish control, as inwardly she was very vulnerable and didn't want anyone to see that. With the wisdom of hindsight, Richard now feels that Dora may have felt upset at the re-surfacing of family into her life. It may have raised all sorts of issues concerning the family from which she had estranged herself. She may have realised a post-traumatic episode which manifested itself in a final argument when their individual tempers each got the better of them. Dora expected and demanded that things go her way and was unforgiving when they didn't.

Dora was an exacting and fastidious teacher - and when Richard began helping her with the silkscreen series you see in this exhibition, he had no previous experience with the medium, nor conventional art school training. Directions from Dora were short, sharp and to the point and a high standard of quality was expected from Richard as he printed the images Dora had made. Dora issued orders: the "pulls" (when you drag the colour across the silkscreen with a squeegee) had to be even. The screen itself, "Dead clean to start with!" - and - "Only one pull each time with no hesitation!". As with everything Richard was employed to do, she expected him to be able to do things "first up", to be good at everything.

Dora proceeded in the manner of someone expecting others working on their behalf to reach and maintain an absolute standard of perfection at all times. It was rigorous training and education - and looking at the work now, Richard measured up equally to those standards and I think Dora was well aware of that - she expected it of him.

The faces evolved in the series through her great knowledge of anatomy and portraiture. These are her later works which are a distillation of all that came before. In their deceptive simplicity, they are the summary of her knowledge and experience as an artist.

The works relate to her early days of abstraction in the late nineteen forties and early fifties, where from what began as more of an instinctive use of line, colour and evolving shapes, fell into a chance abstract design. Dora had since given up "abstraction" as other people had done it then - she was interested in social realism. She wanted art to be accessible to everyone which is one of the reasons she was a good teacher. Dora had a fundamental belief in humanity, very much driven by equity. She didn't want to reference things in an intellectual way. That would get too complex.

Working out in the landscape at Aldinga helped her to understand the Australian landscape more - the sea light and reflections on the surrounding hills where the light became silvery, led to further simplification in the way she worked. Flat land - sea - hills - light falling - see it in the print *Maslins Beach*. The angular pale shapes of the gum trees bathing in that same silvery light in *Aldinga*, the print next to it.

The heads, some based on persons seen, slightly abstracted, yet still retaining the essence of the personality which first attracted her - you can look around this room in the gallery and see...

Eremophila - a delicate Australian native plant shakes her head and shimmers in an ephemeral light - a nymph of nature.

Stipa - a desert grass - tall, spiky, tossing her head back and gazing down at you in an aloof yet challenging way - suggests mercurial personality changes.

Fish Girl - arising goddess-like from within the sea, invites you to plunge in and swim right up to her face - distorted in an underwater view - we meet within the limitless sea in our minds eye.

Katinka - the daughter of friends, Roy and Nadine Dalgarno, not merely representational, a moment seen captures the essence of the whole.

The life force, the constant abstraction using elements of design and colour is reinforced by the mantra that "less is more". Not all sitters can be identified and perhaps some are idealised versions of a "type". Richard tells me that he has always felt that *Dreaming Girl* is a self-portrait of Dora. And then.....who is *Golden Boy*, the enigmatic sole male presence in this series? I wonder if the title is sarcastic or idealistic or if it holds sentimentally within it a narrative. Like the episodes in the TV series "Seinfeld", in which Jerry Seinfeld calls his legendary, beloved sweater "Golden Boy". I find myself equally intrigued and yet somewhat rebuffed by the image that the title "Golden Boy" conjures for me.

And so, the viewer brings their own perceptions and preconceived ideas into the viewing of these portraits. And if viewed as "types", they are no less valid as portraits, being perhaps more perceptive and accurately descriptive of that elusive attribute "the personality", which makes each human being unique.

There never was an entire exhibition of Dora's prints in her lifetime. This is the first time that this series has been shown as a group for 50 years.

2. Richard

As a very young man, Richard has told me he felt that Dora was like a guru - she was never warm and inviting, though. You had to gain her confidence and by the time you did that, she didn't want you to leave. You had to deserve her trust. "It was like going into the lion's den," he said to me. "You never knew what to expect. You had to manage being with her, on her own terms."

He was in awe of what Dora was doing as an artist - and she had such a strong influence on his approach to looking at colour and form in art in those formative years.

"Dora", he said, "taught you to see in a discerning way." Her influence was so magnetic and powerful, it frightened him away from doing his own artwork. He had to go out into the world to find himself - and then come back, much later, before he could feel confident within himself.

It is difficult enough to find your own voice amongst a chorus of so many others already creating - and we are all influenced in some way by other artists and other people as well. Yet it is so much more difficult when your admiration runs so deep and the artist you admire has made such an impression on you at a much younger age. You don't want to copy - or be compared with them and

come up lacking. Dora was Richard's age now, when she made these prints - but Richard didn't start making pots until he was 60.

Dora is not here now to witness his achievements. Her many discussions with him were about life and art and "being true to yourself". She was passing on the wisdom about what she herself had learned in life - and Richard felt he had to carry this wisdom within himself until the moment was right. He had to have the courage of his convictions. It was all about finding your purpose - so you can find yourself.

These pots he makes are pared away down to the bare bones. There is no room left for embellishments of any form, for the bones, the basic structure, is so important - and he refers back to Dora's sentiments of "less is more" in their construction. He spends a long time on planning and doesn't allow for any distortion in the design, should it take place. Distortion is something that can take place in the firing process unintentionally.

He looks for the structural and architectural form - that it should adhere to his principles of design. "Most pots just rise up from the ground," Richard says, but he likes to instigate a pencil line at the base which forms a foundation on which to build. A lid must fit securely and discreetly within the rim of the awaiting pot. A cup must nestle smoothly onto a saucer. Although you are controlling the process, a lot of it is out of your control once the work is in the kiln and the firing process has begun.

Clay has memory in the kiln - so slight or major distortions can and do happen. A teapot can distort in this way - the handle and spout may be perfectly lined up before firing but once out of the kiln can appear slightly twisted or distorted, as a result of this memory being revived in the kiln. On a wheel head, if thrown in an anticlockwise direction, the clay shows a spiral effect and becomes springlike - wanting to unwind when fired in the kiln. This is only one of the difficulties encountered. Porcelain, which is fired at very high temperatures, becomes more liquid the higher you fire it. This can cause what is known as a "slumping" effect, which must be compensated for beforehand. So one needs to exert an extra discipline, one can't just let things happen - although things do happen. There is always a risk during the firing process.

Yet for all this sense of exerting control and compensating, almost gambling on an anticipated outcome, Richard feels there is never any conscious effort within him in the making. This is where Dora's early influence is most strongly felt - almost as a "muscle memory" - and this does not come from the "discerning eye" alone, but from the endless practice of making cups and pots and bowls and becoming so acquainted with the elemental force of clay and shaping it.

Much later in life, when Richard first began working with clay, he had his own doubts of achieving success - but was greatly encouraged by Bruce Nuske, who at that time was head of the ceramics department of TAFE in Light Square and a much loved and highly respected ceramic artist himself. Being a great teacher, Bruce simply suggested from the outset, that Richard "play" - and in allowing himself to play, all those fearful restrictions of having to be perfect, having to live up to certain pre-ordained standards, simply melted away in the enchantment of finding one's true creative voice through such an earthy and tangible medium.

In this current body of works there exist a dichotomy between simplicity and complexity. Freshclay has a life and texture. The wheel is the drawing board, allowing something to manifest through feeling. Bisque fired, it becomes static again - and then undergoes a metamorphosis through the alchemical means of glazing and firing, creating the desired lustre and depth of colour, adding life and spirit to the animation process.

The resolved colours of the glazes in these works are yellow and blue. These colours Richard likes. He mixes his own glazes and glaze development is slow when you are making pots - you have to try a million different recipes and it is very time consuming. Richard likes working with a restrained palette - choosing colour is something you have to consider and do lots of glaze testing before introducing new colours. The overall effect should be subtle and yet resolved - colours should not overwhelm the form but function as part of the form. Contemplation of the negative spaces surrounding and within a form is important too.

There is no conscious effort to make an obvious connection between his work and Dora's but there exist many underlying principles that Richard learned from Dora. There are observational influences of line and proportion to be considered as well as the aesthetics and quality of workmanship - the craft of it all. For Richard, it is important that pots should have "lift" and that they should have a "breath". They should float on the surface on which they are displayed.

By making lots of cups he understands the material more and can then begin to incorporate the aesthetics into various shapes and forms that haven't been done before. His main aim is always to bring life into something static. In imbuing an object with a use, you are endowing it with a sense of potential. Looking at the central plinth here in the gallery, the cups have a conscious arrangement, assembled like musical notes in a score. There is intent in their placement.

The work is envisaged as a whole. Richard brings to these objects a simplicity and function while adhering to the aesthetics of rhythm and line and the balanced harmony of form occupying space..... This is the artist's eye at work.

He plays around with different handle forms and when you pick them up, they still fit in the hand well and there is no awkwardness. Attention to structure is something important and integral in something you hold and then bring to your lip - like a cup.

Following the principles espoused by Dora throughout her own life as an artist, Richard has found his own unique voice. For Richard though, the pots in this show arose fully formed and without conscious referencing or direct inspiration from those wonderful prints with which he has such a close association begun all those years ago.

Today, Richard feels that both Dora and Jim would be happy with the work he has created and the way that these two bodies of artworks look together in this exhibition - and how they come together at last, continuing to express a harmonious dialogue between them.

3. Christine

Ghost Forest - It is depicting the weaving of spirit or other world -woven into our own present reality. The trees are ourselves, blindly searching, staring in every other direction without focussing on what is manifesting through and between them. It implies a place where you can sense an other-worldliness happening - where you get glimpses of these intimations. To attain a state where you are in permanent co-habitation with them, is to attain Heaven, or Nirvana. If you are human, the most you are limited to here on earth are those brief moments when one dimension leaks into another.

We see and sense what we are told is there and what we in turn expect to experience. The mind is powerful and we may be at the mercy of our own blinkered vision, prejudices and perceptions. Just as physicists have found that what was previously thought to be empty space outside the nucleus of an atom where the electron circles alone endlessly, is now found to be not empty at all, but full of subatomic particles. Just as we thought the universe was empty space surrounding suns and planets, now it is full of Dark Matter and Black Holes - a celestial soup.

There are narratives in all my works here in this exhibition - storylines that have been woven through paint and pencil and at the base of it all is the search to express that other state of being - that unfamiliar way of being. The ability to recognise the unfamiliar is with us always, it is just that our physical limitations and our powers of perception, which may be narrow, prevent us from seeing it. When we do see it in those brief moments however, we sometimes retreat in fear.

What we fear is the eclipse - to have the familiar obscured or part obscured by some amorphous unknowable shape that passes in front of our line of sight. To see is to perceive - there is an innate fear in losing our sense of vision for the world would become unfamiliar and out of our control.

Self Portrait during an Eclipse began as a long overdue response to a question from Dora Chapman. I was one of Dora's carers for the last five years of her life when she was suffering from Alzheimers and living at home. I knew a very different Dora - but although she could appear remote and very much in another world, she would sometimes come out with very astute and perceptive comments.

Once she asked me in her imperious voice, "Have you ever painted a self-portrait?" and when I answered "No", she sharply retorted, "Well, it's about time that you did!"

That it is thirty years late makes no difference really - except for more wrinkles. The use of the hand mirror refers to vanity and I have made this mirror like some large planet or moon, eclipsing the viewer's view as well as my own. Gazing in the mirror while painting allowed me to discover more wrinkles, more lines. It was during co-vid lock-down periods last year, when we all felt confined within safe spaces - and my view out on the world was being eclipsed by the tall buildings going up around the city where I live. Getting older, my world was closing in.

Contemplating the ageing process, the passing of friends - it was an unfamiliar territory I found myself contemplating and it taps into that primitive fear of the unknown - when darkness descends.

Origins of Memory - a still life, a collection of objects - jug, bowl etc., these instigate memories - each one has a reference point. Looking at an object and remembering - where did I get that from? Who gave this to me? A memory then surfaces and leads to another. Along a pathway it unfolds, then into another - and I and my memory self are in another world where I once was fully present, both physically and mentally. That time then, is in the past to me now - but back then, it was the present. I am time travelling through memory.

A shadow is cast across the objects as I watch - time is moving forward and the afternoon passes in my present physical world - but in my memory world it can be night or morning, hot or cold and raining. I am remembering such states along with the objects but my memory won't be the same for you. There may be no relevance for you who are having the viewer's experience of seeing colour and shapes arranged in a decorative pattern - an illusion of form. But perhaps it provokes a series of memories for you, memories that I cannot begin to guess at.

When the sun moves further over, a shadow is cast. a shadow of someone, maybe it's me - does it signify my presence in that world - or my intending retreat and absence?

The Egyptian jug in its stillness is a relic left over after another life has passed on. It holds the essence of its maker, the intent of bringing something into being from not being. It exists here at a scheduled time and place. It may outlive its creator - does it still carry intent or have a place in the scheme of things. Does it still delight and inspire the imagination in the eyes of its new beholders? Or is it just another piece of detritus occupying space - has it outlived its usefulness and become outmoded as space junk?

While it appears solid in this world, does it also reveal some sort of evidence of existence in some other dimension? These are the mysteries of existence hovering within the realms of the possible or probable. We rely on memory to make an assumption within this world. If that memory is incorrect or corrupted, then how can we rely on it to make our judgement and form a correct perception of the world in which we find ourselves now - if it has become an unfamiliar territory.

We try to focus on the familiar, we name objects and we search for similarities within objects to help us identify the nature of what we are beholding.

"For reason and knowledge are acquired through perception" (Denis Diderot - 18th century French philosopher). And this is the value system we intend to pass on to our descendants and take with us to the afterlife.

Shelf Life - and The Myth of Use - How long can we keep something and have it still maintain its usefulness? The dictates of fashion, health and profitability all decide when something is past its use by date. Is it collectable, therefore still valuable? It all depends on trends - but how much can we keep on the shelf at once?

The title also refers to the actual continental shelf around the landmass of beaches. Ocean life, shells and other sea creatures cast up on the shore become trophies for us to collect and keep on our shelves at home. How long are they useful to us and when do they become dust-laden kitsch heirlooms from grandparents' holidays more than 60 years ago?

The shells too, form elaborate temporary homes for crabs and delicate ocean dwellers needing protection. In time, the creatures grow larger and cast them off, or get eaten while looking for a bigger shell. That anything can be useful forever is a myth. We all pass on and leave behind empty shells. We can hide behind masks - but at some time they too, are discarded. These masks are plastic, so will remain for too long a time as a ghostly reminder - all that is left as a tangible remnant of a former life with human features.

On either side in the painting, like a postcard image, it indicates the ocean views - past and future. In the future with global warming on the horizon, is the unsettling image of thousands of red squid off the North American coastline - getting bigger and more aggressive - soon the ocean will be teeming with them - apocalyptic sunset colours are in the sky.

Lie Down in Darkness - One day, while I was caring for Dora - she indicated for me to sit on the side of her bed (in later years with her, I would have to put her to bed before I left that evening). So I sat on the bedside and she then indicated for me to lean closer and she began to plait my hair - well, one side of it, closest to her - I was cast back in my mind's eye to when I was little girl and every morning my Mother would plait my hair into two very long plaits. And here I was now, in this funny role reversal for the carer and the person being cared for. I was dismissed once the plait was completed. Dora waved me off with a self satisfied "There now, you can go!" And I went off down the street to catch my bus, with only one side plaited and one side flowing free.

This painting arises from some of those thoughts. In my room, the bed from my childhood - Queen Anne style - the orange slatted shadows of venetian blinds run around the room - the streetlights shining through on the walls. The fear of other dimensions opening up within my room - I had never read 'The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe' as a child - I wish that I had back then. I sensed there were other worlds waiting - under the bed - behind the cabinet by the bedside - places from where you never returned, if you entered them - a bit like death.

It is the bed in which you have your earliest memories and dreams. Stories are read to you there, your imagination begins there - and it is to the bed you are often led in your old age, or in sickness. The broken doll in the foreground either floats, animated into life, or is tossed down, abandoned. Dressing table ornaments and jars and pots of cosmetics defy gravity as they float in weightlessness and are borne away out into deep space. Down on the floor of the bedroom - we think of it as the ground - but really, beneath the earth below, it is more outer space, as our world, Planet Earth, revolves around the Sun. We become conscious then that what surrounds us in the room does not contain us. Bones and bits of broken ornaments - all the stuff you find when a house is abandoned or demolished, float off into deep space too.

A crack of light from another room slants from the open door across the floor towards the bed where two shadow entities sit - child and grownup - or child that was and now become grownup. In the bed, the hunched form - is it a sleeping child or an elderly person dreaming their last dream alone?

Among the Nameless Trees - Could shadows in their flatness and tone, their two dimensionality, depict a life gone past - a life to come? Shadows cast on a surface are an expression of intent or

actuality. An existence witnessed, described - they are a form of communication between worlds. These worlds may be unseen or hinted at. The result of light hitting an object and not passing through. They are the by-product, the imprint of one form of existence onto another. Like hearing voices from another room, there is no real physical contact. They cover an area without impact or touching of any physical kind.

This is a land that awaits the imprint of humankind - or is it seeing the retreat of the human form? Is it reality, the present we are seeing here, or an implied action in the future? Does it mean we should live gently on this earth - mere shadows cast against another living form - or that we were here once and this is a timepiece - a brief measurement of time when humans roamed the earth.

I found the title for the drawing in a poem by Judith Wright - "The Old House". A title is important to sum up and encapsulate the essence of the meaning in the image. I was happy to find that poem, which I had never read before I did the drawing. It related to what I was implying in my work and the phrase "among the nameless trees" rang true.

You can be in a land, naming in a conventional way to depict and confer ownership.

A land before habitation by humankind is alien. The trees don't know the names we have for them. If other inhabitants from other races live there, they may have their own names for what surrounds them there. These are things we may not even contemplate or recognise in our haste to make the familiar known and benign and owned by us - safe and explicable at all costs - but the shadow passes - and we are gone.

Christine McCormack, 29 May 2021