

Robert Jacks: Order & Variation

Exhibition Labels

Robert Jacks (1943–2014) was one of Australia's most accomplished and significant abstract artists. He studied sculpture at Prahran Technical College, Melbourne, from 1958 to 1960, and painting at the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology from 1961 to 1962. Jacks's debut solo exhibition in 1966 at Gallery A, Melbourne, was an immediate success, with the sellout show receiving extensive critical acclaim and launching his artistic career. Patrick McCaughey later declared that the 1960s 'arrived in Melbourne' when Jacks's Gallery A exhibition opened.

Jacks's complex and geometrically balanced canvases combined drawing with painted forms and were adorned with Constantin Brâncuși-inspired sculptural elements and elegant rainbows. Jacks brought to these works a distinctive sensibility that offered different possibilities for a new Australian abstraction, and included in them were themes and motifs that he would revisit and rework throughout his life. Beginning with this groundbreaking exhibition, Jacks had a remarkable career that spanned six decades, including ten years living and working in Canada and the United States. A pioneer of Australian abstract art, Jacks produced an extraordinary body of work that explored abstraction in painting, sculpture, drawing and

printmaking, and placed him at the forefront of twentieth-century Australian art.

The year of Jacks's solo exhibition at Gallery A, Melbourne, 1966, coincided with the end of the dominance of figurative expressionist painting in Australia, and a move by Jacks and many of his contemporaries to a new style of hard-edged abstraction. The following year, the National Gallery of Victoria mounted *Two Decades of American Painting*, the first large-scale exhibition of contemporary American art in Australia. This exhibition, along with Jacks's friendship with American artist James Doolin, had a profound influence on his work.

Jacks's second solo show was held in late 1967 at South Yarra Gallery, Melbourne, and comprised predominantly refined, minimal paintings featuring arcs and squares in expanses of flat colour. The lyrical forms previously presented at Gallery A were replaced by geometric illusions, displaying Jacks's new experimentation with angles and symmetry.

In 1968 Jacks's *Red painting* was included in the NGV's landmark exhibition *The Field*, the first comprehensive Australian exhibition of Colour Field painting and abstract sculpture. The completion of this painting marked the time when Jacks began to embrace minimalist aesthetics and conceptual art, in which an idea is as important as the object itself, and sometimes replaces the object altogether.

Like many artists, Jacks left Australia to experience life overseas, but unlike many at the time, he went to America via Canada rather than to England. Jacks was just shy of his twenty-fifth birthday when he arrived in Toronto, in 1968, before settling in New York the following year.

He became closely involved in activities in downtown New York, especially in Soho where he lived. To support his practice, he worked as a barman at the Broome Street Bar alongside other young artists and writers, serving a clientele that included key art-world figures. Jacks also became a contact for other Australian artists visiting New York, and was a driving force behind the establishment of the Australia Council for the Arts' Greene Street Studio international residency program.

Jacks's arrival overseas marked a distinct second phase in his art. It was during this period that he met artistic luminaries such as Sol LeWitt and Donald Judd, and his unique visual language matured, incorporating influences from the major exponents of contemporary abstraction, minimalism and conceptual art. LeWitt facilitated one of Jacks's first New York exhibitions when he selected him to inaugurate a new international exhibition program at the New York Cultural Centre in 1971.

In 1976 Jacks moved to Austin, Texas, as artist-in-residence with the Hot Sun Foundation. The distinctive terrain of the

region and the somewhat unexpected stimulus this provided for his art prompted Jacks, for the first time in more than a decade, to work directly from the landscape. The resulting images featured zigzags and angular forms which, while fundamentally abstract, recorded elements of the area's unique plant life and geography. Like fragments of the New York grid now exploded, these new shapes heralded an expansion of Jacks's graphic vocabulary which would form the basis of future work.

It was also his experience of Texas that encouraged Jacks to leave New York. While the lure of this great metropolis had been irresistible to Jacks in his mid twenties, with greater maturity and the confidence born of a decade of dedicated work, he realised he could make art anywhere. In early 1978 he returned to Melbourne as artist-in-residence at the University of Melbourne, where he began a series of paintings, etchings, watercolours and graphite drawings based on the Texas drawings, all of which variously drew on the gestural freedom he had found in Texas and the formal structure of the grid.

Jacks's confidence as an artist coincided with the 1980s, a decade in which the art market experienced a significant and sustained boom, and he responded with sequential series of major paintings, and works in other media, that reflected the optimism of the time. Moving to Sydney in 1980, Jacks embarked on a new series that drew on his Texas work, and from which *Bent yellow arrow – still life 3*, 1981, was selected for inclusion in the inaugural *Australian Perspectives* at the Art Gallery of New South Wales in 1981. This painting later won the Henry Salkauskas Purchase Award, the richest prize for contemporary art in Australia at the time.

The *Metropolis* series followed, and its abstracted representations of the city reflected Jacks's experience of both Manhattan and Sydney. This series of paintings also initiated Jacks's use of a palette knife rather than a brush to apply paint, and the establishment of a technique in which he progressively built up layers and scraped them back to produce a rich textural surface of nuanced colour. In 1983 Jacks returned to Melbourne as artist-in-residence at Prahran College, continuing a series of ambitious paintings which was marked by its distinctive use of vivid colour and monumental scale.

Jacks moved to Central Victoria in 1990 and worked prolifically, his studio practice

characterised by a relentless creative energy. From the monumental to the ephemeral, Jacks's art always reflected a desire for pictorial order and structure, and whether gestural or geometric in style, this was counterbalanced by his masterful control of colour. During this and subsequent decades he produced paintings, sculptures, prints, drawings and artist's books, all of which merged new directions in his art with references to the past. Jacks's art did not develop in a strictly linear way – his earlier output was a source of ongoing inspiration, with elements of his very first works reappearing in various forms, reworked and reinterpreted, throughout his oeuvre.

Reflecting on his career, Jacks wrote that when he arrived in New York, in 1969, all of his major works had already been made in some form. Given that he had been out of art school only a few years at this time, this seems like an exaggerated recollection that omits the hard slog of a long career. However, while his oeuvre reveals continual development and change over six decades, careful scrutiny also reveals a remarkable consistency of language and form.

Bowl of cherries 2

1958

oil on plywood

Estate of the artist, Victoria

Court of the violin

1958

oil on plywood

Estate of the artist, Victoria

Jacks was only fifteen years of age when he commenced studies at Prahran Technical College, Melbourne, majoring in sculpture, in 1958. His initial lessons predominantly involved copying from books, and his first works were modelled on those of sculptor Henry Moore. It was during this time, while looking at the work of Pablo Picasso and Joan Miró, that Jacks moved towards abstraction and began painting Picasso-inspired guitar forms. Jacks's interest in Cubism is evident in this group of still-life paintings of everyday objects – vases, bowls and violins – which he has reduced to their basic geometric shapes.

Still life with goblet

1958

oil on plywood

Estate of the artist, Victoria

Vase

1958

oil on plywood

Estate of the artist, Victoria

Bird face

1959

oil on composition board

Estate of the artist, Victoria

Box of circles

1959

oil on composition board

Estate of the artist, Victoria

Circling course

1959

oil on composition board

Estate of the artist, Victoria

Circle of the moon

1959

oil on composition board

Estate of the artist, Victoria

Depth of the circle

1959

oil on composition board

Estate of the artist, Victoria

Access to publications on contemporary international art was limited during the late 1950s, but Jacks did own a selection of Methuen pocket series books on British artists whose work informed his early practice. In 1959 Jacks completed this series on masonite comprised of geometric shapes overlaid with circular forms, which openly displayed the influence of British painter Ben Nicholson. The British influence on Jacks's work reflected both the teaching in Australian art schools at the time and the large holdings of modern British art in collections such as the National Gallery of Victoria and Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney.

Four circles

1959

oil on composition board

Estate of the artist, Victoria

House of circles

1959

oil on composition board

Estate of the artist, Victoria

They wait

1959

oil on composition board

Estate of the artist, Victoria

Three points of the circle

1959

oil on composition board

Estate of the artist, Victoria

Weight of the circle

1959

oil on composition board

Estate of the artist, Victoria

Compelling vesture no. 1

1965

oil and charcoal on canvas

Art Gallery of Ballarat, Ballarat

Gift of Dr Eric Westbrook under the Cultural

Gifts Program, 1994

1994.27

Jacks's Gallery A exhibition featured several versions of his *Compelling vesture* works. Each adaptation reworked a configuration of angular and curved forms in varying palettes. The first works are monochromatic, and through progressive variations, Jacks used his remarkable skill as a colourist to build on the palette. Seen together, the anthropomorphic, abstracted figures in the *Compelling vesture* works emerge as a cluster of solitary wanderers. In 1966 Jacks entered *Compelling vesture no. 4*, 1965, in Benalla Art Gallery's inaugural art competition and was one of four winning artists whose work was acquired by the gallery.

Compelling vesture no. 2

1965

oil on canvas

Private collection, Courtesy Lauraine Diggins

Fine Art

Pensive aura

1965

oil on canvas

Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane

Purchased, 1990

1990.266

Circular painting

1966

synthetic polymer paint on canvas

National Gallery of Australia, Canberra

Purchased, 1993

93.1961

Circular painting II

1966

synthetic polymer paint on canvas

National Gallery of Australia, Canberra

Purchased, 1993

93.1962

Drawing 1966

1966

pastel and ink

National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne

Purchased, 1966

1686-5

This pair of drawings was included in Jacks's first and highly successful solo exhibition at Gallery A, Melbourne, in 1966. While the lyrical drawing in pen and ink relates to the paintings Jacks showed in that exhibition, the presence of the grid and other geometric elements presages the changes in his work that were to come. Within just a few years of this exhibition, Jacks had renounced all expressive gesture in favour of hard-edged minimalist abstraction.

Untitled

1966

pen and ink and colour pastels

National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne

Gift of Mr James Mollison, 1994

P66-1994

Silently emptied

1966

oil and pencil on canvas

Private collection, Brisbane

Annotated infinity II

1967

oil on canvas

Collection of the Hirsh family, Melbourne

Grounded in an expanse of even colour, the archway of *Annotated infinity II* mirrors the architecture of the windows of the house Jacks purchased in Hawthorn in 1965. The brickwork around the arched window matched exactly – in both shape and scale – the grosgrain border of the painted curve. Critical responses to Jacks's South Yarra Gallery exhibition in 1967 were less favourable than those to his debut, with many reviewers perplexed by his departure from delicate lyrical works. The critical reaction also reflected that a large proportion of the Melbourne art world in the 1960s was yet to embrace minimal abstract art.

Bound time 2

1967

oil on canvas

Estate of the artist, Victoria

Box black

1967, 2003 remade

enamel paint on wood

Estate of the artist, Victoria

Box red

1967, 2003 remade

enamel paint on wood

Estate of the artist, Victoria

Box white

1967, 2003 remade
enamel paint on wood

Estate of the artist, Victoria

The 'open box' series of sculptures is informed by the basic shapes that feature in *Red painting*, 1968. Jacks's framer made the first box, which was painted white and measured 12 x 12 x 12 inches. Its open framework required no carving – it was a sculpture that could be made anywhere – and each time that Jacks moved, he remade the sculpture, which became a permanent part of each of his studios. This series initiated an ongoing preoccupation with the sequence 1–12, which was based on the simple count of the twelve lines that comprise an open cube.

Red triangle

1967
oil on canvas

Private collection, Melbourne

Beyond the outsider

1968
synthetic polymer paint on canvas

National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne

Purchased, 1971

CCA2-1971

Red painting

1968

oil on canvas

TarraWarra Museum of Art collection,

Tarrawarra

Gift of Eva Besen AO and Marc Besen AO,

2001

2002.040

One of the lasting icons of *The Field* exhibition, *Red painting* was completed before Jacks left Melbourne for Toronto, Canada, in February 1968, and before he had any knowledge of the exhibition or his inclusion in it. Formally abstract, the five vertical fields of flat colour are given depth by the ribbons of graduated tonal sequences that border and divide the work. At the heart of *Red painting* is the relationship between Jacks's geometric minimalism and his poetic disposition, and it made a resounding statement about new abstraction in Australia.

Untitled

1968

watercolour, pencil

Estate of the artist, Victoria

Untitled

1968

watercolour, pencil

Estate of the artist, Victoria

Untitled

1968

watercolour, pencil

Estate of the artist, Victoria

Untitled

1968

watercolour, pencil

Estate of the artist, Victoria

Untitled

1968

watercolour, pencil

Estate of the artist, Victoria

Untitled

1968

watercolour, pencil

Estate of the artist, Victoria

Untitled

1968

watercolour, pencil

Estate of the artist, Victoria

Untitled

1968

watercolour, pencil

Estate of the artist, Victoria

Monument 1

1968 conceived, 1999 made
enamel paint on wood

Estate of the artist, Victoria

‘When an artist uses a conceptual form of art, it means all of the planning and decisions are made beforehand and the execution is a perfunctory affair. The idea becomes a machine that makes art.’

Sol LeWitt, ‘Paragraphs on Conceptual Art’, *Artforum*, Summer 1967

Monument 3

1968 conceived, 1999 made
enamel paint on wood

Estate of the artist, Victoria

Four strips

1968–69
synthetic polymer paint on canvas

Art Gallery of Western Australia, Perth
Purchased 1988 1988/0441.a-d

Jacks left Australia in early 1968 for Toronto, Canada, where he planned to wait for his American visa before going to New York. As it happened, he stayed in Toronto for eighteen months, establishing a productive studio and a network of creative peers, as well as showing new work in a number of exhibitions. One of the very few examples of Jacks's Canadian works to have returned to Australia, this luminous painting, which points to his confident uptake of pure geometric abstraction, was included in the solo exhibition held at the Pollock Gallery, Toronto, in 1969.

Counting 1–12

1969

watercolour

Estate of the artist, Victoria

(Counting 1–12)

1969

watercolour

Estate of the artist, Victoria

It was the construction of the first 'open box' sculpture in 1967 that initiated Jacks's ongoing interest in the sequence 1–12, wherein each number represents one of the lines that makes up an open-sided cube. From this time on, he used this numerical structure as the basis for works in various mediums, representing 1–12 by accumulating lines, sequences of stamped or typed numbers or letters, and clusters of lines organised into groups, moving from a single line to lines organised into groups of twelve: four groups of three, three groups of four, or two groups of six.

Counting 1–12

1969

watercolour on buff paper

Estate of the artist, Victoria

Cut paper piece: 45 through to 90 degrees

1969

paper, wood, transparent synthetic polymer resin, composition board

Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane

Purchased 1994 under the Contemporary Art Acquisition Program with funds from John

Potter and Roz MacAllan through the

Queensland Art Gallery Foundation 1994.216

This work is a rare survivor from the decade that Jacks spent living and working in Canada and the United States, and represents another of his serial preoccupations, the progression from an angle of 45 to 90 degrees. Originally appearing in three-dimensional form in the *Box* and *Edge* sculptures made before Jacks left Melbourne in 1968, this movement, through which the increasing angle documents the transformation of a triangle to a rectangle or square, formed the basis of numerous works in various mediums and formats.

Cut piece, Modular 2

1969

rubber

Heide Museum of Modern Art, Bulleen

Gift of Robert Jacks, 2013 (2013.1)

Grid

1969

pencil on graph paper

Estate of the artist, Victoria

Blue felt cut: 45°

1970, 1994 remade

felt

Estate of the artist, Victoria

Edge black

1970, 2003 remade

enamel paint on wood

Estate of the artist, Victoria

Edge red

1970, 2003 remade
enamel paint on wood

TarraWarra Museum of Art collection,
Tarrawarra

Gift of Julienne and Robert Jacks, 2007

2007.020

Edge red

1970, 2003 remade
enamel paint on wood

Estate of the artist, Victoria

Edge white

1970, 2003 remade
enamel paint on wood

Estate of the artist, Victoria

Four edge black

1970, 2003 remade

enamel paint on wood

Estate of the artist, Victoria

From the original 'open box', variations began to emerge. The four edges that comprised one box plane were isolated and reconfigured into a four-sided sculpture that was displayed as individual components leaning against the wall. Each side was carved along its length, modulating from 45 to 90 degrees, a direct reference to the ribboned borders of *Red painting*, 1968. Reducing the open edge even further, Jacks subsequently made sculptures based on one side of the box plane. Titled *Edge*, these were exhibited either against the wall or laid on the floor, as if the plinth itself had become the art.

Four edge red

1970, 2003 remade

enamel paint on wood

Estate of the artist, Victoria

Four edge white

1970, 2003 remade
enamel paint on wood

TarraWarra Museum of Art collection,
Tarrawarra

Gift of Julienne and Robert Jacks, 2007

2007.019

Open edge red

1970, 2003 remade
enamel paint on wood, string

TarraWarra Museum of Art collection,
Tarrawarra

Gift of Julienne and Robert Jacks, 2007

2007.021

Untitled

1970
watercolour and gouache over pencil

Estate of the artist, Victoria

Untitled

1970
watercolour and gouache over pencil

Estate of the artist, Victoria

White felt cut piece 45°–90°

1970, 1994 remade

felt

National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne

Purchased, Victorian Foundation for Living

Australian Artists, 2012

2012.293.a-f

Many of the works Jacks exhibited in New York were ephemeral. Documented in *An unfinished work* as a set of instructions which could subsequently be remade in an unlimited number of versions, works such as this exemplify the conceptual process-based art Jacks was engaged in at the time. Another of the numerous works that chart the progression between angles of 45 and 90 degrees, and by association between a triangle and a rectangle, this piece also reflects Jacks's interest in the sculptural qualities of these works and the shadows that are cast as pieces fall from the cut surface.

New York greys

1970

oil on plywood

Estate of the artist, Victoria

New York greys

1970

oil on plywood

Estate of the artist, Victoria

New York greys

1970

oil on plywood

Estate of the artist, Victoria

New York greys

1970

oil on plywood

Estate of the artist, Victoria

45–90 paper cut

1971, 2012 remade

paper

McClelland Gallery and Sculpture Park,
Langwarrin

Donated through the Australian Government's
Cultural Gifts Program by Lyn Williams AM,

2013

2013.02

(Paper cut)

1971, 2012 remade
paper

Estate of the artist, Victoria

(45–90)

1971, 2012 remade
paper

Estate of the artist, Victoria

Untitled

1971
bronze, artist's proof

Estate of the artist, Victoria

Knave paltry and poghuing picked green

1972

oil on canvas

Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney

Purchased, 1974

10.1974

By the early 1970s, Jacks had immersed himself in minimalist and conceptual practices, and much of his art – painting, works on paper, sculpture and artist's books – was preoccupied with serial techniques, repetition or systems based on numbers and form. *Knave paltry and poghuing picked green* is one of ten paintings of the same shape and pictorial structure, all originally untitled and later titled with phrases from James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922). Their dark charcoal surfaces are regularly divided by faint white lines, and exemplify Jacks's fascination with the grid.

Open edge

1972

oil on composition board

Estate of the artist, Victoria

Untitled

c. 1972

oil on canvas

Estate of the artist, Victoria

Grey tresses

1973

oil on canvas

Estate of the artist, Victoria

Grid

1973

folded watercolour

Estate of the artist, Victoria

Grid

1973

folded watercolour

Estate of the artist, Victoria

In a room lit by a candle

1973

oil on canvas

Estate of the artist, Victoria

One side in shadow

1973

oil on canvas

Estate of the artist, Victoria

Things not known

1973

oil on canvas

Estate of the artist, Victoria

Folded piece – Green

1976

oil on folded paper

Estate of the artist, Victoria

Untitled

c. 1976

oil on paper

The University of Queensland, Brisbane
Purchased with the assistance of the artists,
Four New York Minimalists, 1980 1980.21

In 1978 the Institute of Modern Art in Brisbane mounted *Fundamental Minimalism: 4 New York Artists*, an exhibition of recent work by Jacks, Ric Evans, Peter Fleishman and Paul Stratigos, curated by John Buckley. Linked by their shared identification as artists who worked in a 'Post-Minimal/Post-Conceptual' manner, they each contributed art that was made within an agreed set of limits, which specified the size, medium and art-store-bought nature of their materials. Jacks made six works, including this piece in which a sheet of painted paper has been folded to create a grid.

Untitled

c. 1976

oil on paper

The University of Queensland, Brisbane
Gift of Malcolm Enright through the Australian
Government's Cultural Gifts Program, 1999
1999.25

Grid New York

1977

coloured pencil and enamel paint on paper

Estate of the artist, Victoria

'Who's afraid of red, yellow, blue and black?'

1977

gouache

McClelland Gallery and Sculpture Park,
Langwarrin

Purchased 1991, The Fornari Bequest

1991.59.a-d

Untitled

1978

watercolour

Estate of the artist, Victoria

Untitled

1978

watercolour

Estate of the artist, Victoria

Untitled

1978

watercolour

Estate of the artist, Victoria

Zig zag

1978

pastel

Estate of the artist, Victoria

Zig zag

1978

pastel

Estate of the artist, Victoria

Quick silvery glances

1979

relief etching, ed. 7/20

Estate of the artist, Victoria

Tejas

1979

relief etching, ed. 4/20

Estate of the artist, Victoria

Transient notion

1979

relief etching, ed. 14/20

Estate of the artist, Victoria

Transit of shadow

1979

oil on canvas

Estate of the artist, Victoria

‘The zigzags are used to explore the potential energy of making marks on a surface. At the same time ... they also suggest an energy which lies beyond the surface. We can view this work either as pure abstraction ... or as landscape. I think this work is both ... motivated by the perception of the natural world, yet ... finally to do with the relationship of the elements within the painting, not with anything extrinsic to it.’

Paul McGillick, 1981

Transposed definition 2

1979

oil on canvas

Estate of the artist, Victoria

Metropolis still life

1980

oil on canvas

Estate of the artist, Victoria

Untitled

1980

collage

Estate of the artist, Victoria

Untitled

1980

collage

Estate of the artist, Victoria

Bent yellow arrow – Still life 3

1981

oil on canvas

Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney

Henry Salkauskas Art (Purchase) Award,

1981

256.1981

This painting and the related series was based on Jacks's Texas experience, with the dense fields of flat and three-dimensional forms that play with perceptions of positive and negative space emerging from the abstracted landscape drawings he had made there. Critics highlighted the decisive breakaway from the grid that these works signalled, as well as the shift in his use of colour. From this time on, Jacks emerged, or arguably re-emerged, as an adventurous colourist who, depending on the mood, was capable of great subtlety and boldness.

Noble gait and countenance

1981

oil on canvas

Estate of the artist, Victoria

Still life – Cityscape

1981

etching, ed. 3/5

National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne

Purchased, 1983

P19-1983

Still life – Cityscape

1981

relief etching, ed. 2/3

National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne

Purchased, 1983

P20-1983

Untitled

1981

etching, first state

Estate of the artist, Victoria

Untitled

1981

relief etching

Estate of the artist, Victoria

Kentish fire and heavy boots

1982

oil on canvas

Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney

Purchased, 1983

165.1983

Another major series of paintings from the early 1980s presented a stark contrast to the *Metropolis* works in their distinctive use of vivid colour. While the geometric forms of paintings such as *Kentish fire and heavy boots* closely echo those of the *Metropolis* works, they include almost no right angles, and random jagged-edged and zigzag shapes are added to the compositional mix.

Monumental in scale, these were the largest works Jacks had produced to date, and viewed retrospectively, they communicate much about the confidence and ambition of the artist, as well as about the ebullient spirit of the time.

Medallion – off the wall

1982

synthetic polymer paint on wood

National Gallery of Australia, Canberra

Gift of Paul Partos, 1993

93.559

Untitled

1982

oil on canvas

Estate of the artist, Victoria

Untitled

1982

synthetic polymer paint on wood

Estate of the artist, Victoria

Jacks has always worked across various mediums simultaneously, exploring the possibilities of an idea in two and three dimensions, and in materials as diverse as watercolour, paint and serial shapes cut into rubber, felt and card. The jostling, angular forms of his mid-1980s paintings prompted Jacks to construct a series of wooden sculptures, painted with similarly textured colour and hung on the wall. These sculptures were displayed in between paintings in his 1982 solo exhibition at Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Sydney, and it was as if the flat planes of the canvas had emerged from the surface to assume three-dimensional form.

Untitled

1982

synthetic polymer paint on wood

Estate of the artist, Victoria

Untitled

1982

synthetic polymer paint on wood

Estate of the artist, Victoria

Untitled

1982

synthetic polymer paint on wood

Estate of the artist, Victoria

Untitled

1982

synthetic polymer paint on wood

Estate of the artist, Victoria

Untitled

1982

synthetic polymer paint on wood

Estate of the artist, Victoria

Metropolis 3 (Revisited)

1983

oil on canvas

Estate of the artist, Victoria

Temple gate

1983

oil and wax on canvas

Estate of the artist, Victoria

Untitled

1983

synthetic polymer paint on wood

Estate of the artist, Victoria

Untitled

1983

synthetic polymer paint on wood

Estate of the artist, Victoria

Untitled

1983

synthetic polymer paint on wood

Estate of the artist, Victoria

Untitled

1983

synthetic polymer paint on wood

Estate of the artist, Victoria

Lofty garden

1984

watercolour

Estate of the artist, Victoria

Metropolis 4

1984

oil on canvas

Private collection, Perth

Metropolis 6

1984

oil on canvas

Estate of the artist, Victoria

The *Metropolis* series drew on Jacks's experience of Manhattan, as well as the view from his Lavender Bay balcony – from which he could see the Sydney Harbour Bridge, with cars, buses and trains, as well as ships on the harbour and aeroplanes in the sky, all coming from different directions, reminding him of the futuristic images in Fritz Lang's 1927 silent film of the same name. A rhythm charting the ebb and flow of activity throughout each day is discernible within the series, and the long triangular forms, like arrowheads, that represent the modern freeway are a constant throughout.

Tangled girdle

1984

watercolour

Estate of the artist, Victoria

Acuminated granite

1984–85

oil on canvas

Estate of the artist, Victoria

Metropolis 10

1984–85

oil on canvas

Estate of the artist, Victoria

Angriling

1985

watercolour

Estate of the artist, Victoria

Crossbones

1985

watercolour

Estate of the artist, Victoria

In 1986 Jacks and fellow artists Lesley Dumbrell and Victor Majzner were the subjects of *Colour and Transparency*, an exhibition at the National Gallery of Victoria focusing on their work in watercolour. Jacks contributed a series of large-scale works that followed the essential composition of his *Metropolis* paintings but which assumed a

completely different character as a result of the delicacy and luminosity of the watercolour medium. Writing in the exhibition's catalogue, Patrick McCaughey noted that Jacks's 'inventiveness and decorativeness constantly meet an opposing instinct or principle: his desire for a pictorial order or clearly perceived structural rigour'.

Metropolis

1985

oil on canvas

Collection of the Hirsh family, Melbourne

Metropolis 12

1985

oil on canvas

Estate of the artist, Victoria

Metropolis 13

1985

oil on canvas

Bendigo Art Gallery, Bendigo

Purchased with the assistance of the Friends
of the Bendigo Art Gallery, 1993 1993.80

Metropolis 14

1985

oil on canvas

National Gallery of Australia, Canberra

Purchased, 1986

86.1

Pink pier and figure

1985

oil on canvas

National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne

Purchased, 1985

AC1-1986

Past unfolded

1986

oil on canvas

Estate of the artist, Victoria

**Transit of shadows in nocturnal
predominance no. 2**

1987

oil on canvas

Estate of the artist, Victoria

An elongated wedge, reminiscent of a sail, became the constant feature of Jacks's paintings in the late 1980s. While this form had featured in previous works, it now assumed greater prominence, interrupting the prevailing right-angled geometry of other compositional elements. In many ways, the grid remained a key element of Jacks's work, but as Paul McGillick wrote, it had 'been dismantled and reassembled, analysed and provoked into configurations which, at first glance, [belied] their origins' and which were 'intuitions of the grid rather than ... literal renderings'.

Constellations

1988

oil on canvas

Estate of the artist, Victoria

'[Jacks's] kind of creative ambiguity is exemplified by a mingling of poetic and intellectual inclinations. On the one hand, his paintings are gestural, painterly and moody. On the other, they are fastidiously contrived geometric structures, proud of their emotional reticence.'

Paul McGillick, 1989

Past unfolded 6

1989–92

oil on canvas

Estate of the artist, Victoria

Wedge #1–5

1994

bronze

Estate of the artist, Victoria

Sculpture, Jacks's first field of formal study, always played a significant role in his practice, continually related to the forms incorporated in his paintings and often used as a technique to work through a particular idea or concept. In this series of bronze sculptures, Jacks combined the contrary shapes of the triangular sail from his *Wedge* paintings with the curved shapes of his Picasso-inspired guitar forms, altering the relationship between these binary opposites through each progression of the sequence.

Cast guitar

1996

bronze

Estate of the artist, Victoria

Cast guitar

1996

bronze

Estate of the artist, Victoria

Cast guitar

1996

painted bronze

Estate of the artist, Victoria

Suite Espanola #1

1996–2001

oil and enamel paint on wood

Estate of the artist, Victoria

Suite Espanola #2

1996–2001

oil and enamel paint on wood

Estate of the artist, Victoria

Suite Espanola #10 (Red)

1996–2001

oil and enamel paint on wood

Estate of the artist, Victoria

Guitar woman, tower night

1997

oil on canvas

Estate of the artist, Victoria

In 1997 Jacks contributed two monumental canvases to the invitational John McCaughey Memorial Prize at the National Gallery of Victoria. By this time, he had returned to using brushes to apply paint rather than a palette knife, and both paintings were invigorated by juxtapositions of flat colours, rather than textures, laid down in tonal and vivid contrasting arrangements. One of these paintings, *Guitar woman, tower night*, merged an irregular grey and black grid with abstract shapes, including a large fragmented guitar, combining two of the most enduring graphic forms of Jacks's oeuvre.

Still life with vase and fruit

1997

synthetic polymer paint on wood

Estate of the artist, Victoria

Untitled

c. 1997

synthetic polymer paint on wood

Estate of the artist, Victoria

Untitled

c. 1997

synthetic polymer paint on wood

Estate of the artist, Victoria

Untitled

c. 1997

synthetic polymer paint on wood

Estate of the artist, Victoria

Untitled

c. 1997

synthetic polymer paint on wood

Estate of the artist, Victoria

Untitled

c. 1997

synthetic polymer paint on wood

Estate of the artist, Victoria

Untitled

c. 1997

wood, wire

Estate of the artist, Victoria

Untitled

c. 1997

wood, wire

Estate of the artist, Victoria

Untitled

c. 1997

wood, wire

Estate of the artist, Victoria

Floating guitar

1999

synthetic polymer paint on cardboard on oil on composition board

Estate of the artist, Victoria

The fragmented Cubist guitar, often seen in silhouette, developed into one of the major recurring themes of Jacks's art. Originally borrowed from Pablo Picasso, it first appeared in Jacks's small-scale abstract paintings on plywood made in the late 1950s, when he was a teenager. This motif was reintroduced to his oeuvre during the 1990s and explored in paintings, on paper and in steel, timber and cardboard sculptures, among other manifestations, which reflected the constant creative energy that characterised Jacks's studio practice.

Floating guitar

1999

enamel paint on cardboard on oil on composition board

Estate of the artist, Victoria

Floating guitar

1999

enamel paint on cardboard on enamel paint
on composition board

Estate of the artist, Victoria

Floating guitar

1999

synthetic polymer paint on cardboard on
enamel paint on composition board

Estate of the artist, Victoria

Untitled

1990s

bronze

Estate of the artist, Victoria

Untitled

1990s

bronze

Estate of the artist, Victoria

Black zenith

2000

enamel paint on wood

Estate of the artist, Victoria

Red zenith

2000

enamel paint on wood

Estate of the artist, Victoria

Waiting

2000

oil on canvas

Estate of the artist, Victoria

White zenith

2000

synthetic polymer paint on wood

Estate of the artist, Victoria

Maquette for a monument

2003

synthetic polymer paint on wood

Estate of the artist, Victoria

The city sleeps

2006

synthetic polymer paint on canvas

TarraWarra Museum of Art collection,

Tarrawarra

Acquired, 2007

2007.001

In 2006 Jacks revisited the theme of the city in a series of large-scale grid-based paintings, which included *The city sleeps*. In addition to making reference to some of his predecessors in abstract art, from Piet Mondrian to the Australian modernist Ralph Balson, these pictures draw on the pixelated view of the world presented by computer-generated imagery of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. They bristle with movement, and the space that existed in Jacks's earlier representations of the city has disappeared entirely. In his vision, the twenty-first-century city, even when it sleeps, is in constant motion.

Dusk till dawn

2007

oil on canvas

Estate of the artist, Victoria

Untitled

2007

oil on canvas

Estate of the artist, Victoria

Untitled

2007

oil on canvas

Estate of the artist, Victoria

Warm and brooding

2006–07

oil on canvas

Estate of the artist, Victoria

Between 2006 and 2007 Jacks produced a major series of monumental paintings that extended his depiction of the grid. His use of the grid is what grounds the works, and the overlapping squares and rectangles combined with the modulating tones provide depth and fluid movement across the canvas. At the centre of these large-scale significant works is Jacks's skilful use of colour and his passion for Minimalism.

Fragment

1965

relief etching, ed. 1/20

Estate of the artist, Victoria

Timbrel and harp soothe

1965

etching, artist's proof

Estate of the artist, Victoria

Jacks produced numerous printed versions of the motifs that featured in his major work *Timbrel and harp soothe*, as well as small-scale etchings of the entire composition. Jacks's reworking of key elements from the painting and varying of the density of the etched lines display his interest in exploring the forms of his art in a number of mediums and at differing scales.

Timbrel and harp soothe

1965

etching, artist's proof 1/3

Estate of the artist, Victoria

Timbrel and harp soothe

1965

relief etching

Estate of the artist, Victoria

Timbrel and harp soothe 3

1965

relief etching, ed. 1/12

Estate of the artist, Victoria

Untitled

1965

etching, ed. 5/5

Estate of the artist, Victoria

Untitled

1965

etching

Estate of the artist, Victoria

Timbrel and harp soothe

1965

oil on canvas

National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne

Purchased, 1966

1650-5

The defining work of Jacks's debut show was *Timbrel and harp soothe*, animated by a series of juxtaposed forms and stylised figures. Placement within the painting is meticulous – the regularity of shapes and space play off one another, creating a complex and lyrical relationship between the angled lines and curved forms. *Timbrel and harp soothe* was purchased by National Gallery of Victoria director Eric Westbrook prior to the opening of the Gallery A exhibition, and was the first work by Jacks to enter the NGV's permanent collection.

(Grid – Grey)

1974

colour screenprint, artist's proof

Estate of the artist, Victoria

'During the American years the grid had become the primary focus of Jacks's work; a subject he explored in a great variety of ways. One development was his use of rubber stamps ... in around 1973. Jacks's stamped grids emerged from his exploration of different ways to make minimal drawings and paintings, such as making rubbings from metal floor or wall grates and using cake coolers or other prefabricated forms as stencils.'

Peter Anderson, 2014

In 1974 Jacks worked with a master printer to produce a series of screenprints that eloquently capture the minimal complexity of the grid structure.

(Grid – Tan on red)

1974

colour screenprint

Estate of the artist, Victoria

Extrapolation (Three greys for BM)

1975

oil and wax on canvas

Collection of Brian and Faith Baker,
Melbourne

(Grid – Grey on blue)

1975

colour screenprint

Estate of the artist, Victoria

(Grid – Grey on red)

1975

colour screenprint

Estate of the artist, Victoria

Transitions

1975

oil and wax on canvas

National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne

Purchased through the C. H. and C. E.

Waddell Trust, 1975

A17-1975

A perfect balance of proportion, colour and tone, *Transitions* reflects the influence of New York minimal art. With exactly the same canvas dimensions, vertical division of space and flat areas of cool colour, this work mirrors the composition of Jacks's 1965 painting *Timbrel and harp soothe*. *Transitions* and the related work *Extrapolations (3 greys for BM)* formed the basis of Jacks's solo exhibition at South Yarra Gallery, Melbourne, in 1975.

(Wedge – Blue and grey)

1975

colour screenprint, artist's proof

Estate of the artist, Victoria

(Wedge – Grey and red)

1975

colour screenprint, artist's proof

Estate of the artist, Victoria

(Wedge – Grey, green, blue)

1975

colour screenprint, artist's proof

Estate of the artist, Victoria

Fixed idea – Condoled classic 1

1978

pencil

The University of Melbourne Art Collection,
Melbourne

Gift of Victor Majzner, 1986

1986.0192

During his residency at the University of Melbourne, Jacks produced a large group of graphite drawings. The drawings were all made on standard-sized sheets of white paper using a soft 4B pencil, with the boundaries of each image established by a variously located rectangular form. Jacks's systematised way of working through an idea in all of its permutations is clearly evident in these works; by using the same materials and rectangular outline in each drawing but varying the division of its internal spaces, as well as the nature and density of its hatching, Jacks produced a series of extraordinary energy.

Fixed idea – Condoled classic 2

1978

pencil

The University of Melbourne Art Collection,
Melbourne

Gift of Victor Majzner, 1986

1986.0193

Fixed idea – Condoled classic 3

1978

pencil

The University of Melbourne Art Collection,
Melbourne

Gift of Victor Majzner, 1986

1986.0194

Fixed idea – Condoled classic 4

1978

pencil

The University of Melbourne Art Collection,
Melbourne

Gift of Victor Majzner, 1986

1986.0195

Fixed idea – Condoled classic 5

1978

pencil

The University of Melbourne Art Collection,
Melbourne

Gift of Victor Majzner, 1986

1986.0196

Untitled

1978

pencil

Estate of the artist, Victoria

Untitled

1978

pencil

Estate of the artist, Victoria

Untitled

1978

pencil

Estate of the artist, Victoria

Untitled

1978

pencil

Estate of the artist, Victoria

Untitled

1978

pencil

Estate of the artist, Victoria

Untitled

1978

pencil

Estate of the artist, Victoria

Untitled

1978

pencil on buff paper

Estate of the artist, Victoria

Untitled

1980

pencil

Estate of the artist, Victoria

Untitled (Totem)

1965

painted wood

Art Gallery of Ballarat, Ballarat

Gift of the artist under the Cultural Gifts

Program, 2001

2001.23

Jacks often worked across various mediums simultaneously, exploring the possibilities of an idea in two and three dimensions, producing sculpture, painting and works on paper which directly informed one another.

Untitled (totem) is a sculptural representation of the Brâncuși-inspired form that features in the painting *Timbrel and harp soothe*, 1965. Jacks's earlier work was always a source of inspiration for his current practice, and in the 1990s, Jacks revisited his 1965 sculpture, casting the original painted wooden work in bronze.

Totem

1990s

bronze

Estate of the artist, Victoria

Totem

1990s

bronze

Estate of the artist, Victoria

Totem

1990s

bronze

Estate of the artist, Victoria

Totem

1990s

bronze

Estate of the artist, Victoria

Internal dialogue

1988

oil on canvas

Estate of the artist, Victoria

Molly and the hurdy gurdy

1982

oil on canvas

Estate of the artist, Victoria

‘Painting has opened up for me. I have no hesitations about it ... I can use any colours I want. I can use any shapes I want. I can do whatever I want ... I’m not worried about the historical context ... I guess, in a way, it’s the magic in a painting that I’m interested in. We can all make illustrations of things. We’ve all done that. We’ve all skimmed across the surface of paintings and ideas. But to do something more than that only comes after a lot of work, a lot of experience.’

Robert Jacks, 1981

Beside her mirage

1985

oil on canvas

Estate of the artist, Victoria

Blaze of days

1985

oil on canvas

Estate of the artist, Victoria

An unfinished work

1966–2014

artist's book: photocopies, gelatin silver photographs, plastic, ballpoint pen and pencil, 322 pages, leather and cardboard cover, metal bolt binding

Estate of the artist, Victoria

Initiated in 1966 following Jacks's first solo exhibition, this volume houses the instructions, notations and drawings that provided the foundation for much of his conceptually based practice. From the 'open box' sculptures of the late 1960s, which Jacks remade in every studio he occupied, to the cut paper and textile pieces that were conceived and first made in New York, *An unfinished work* documents ephemeral activities and ongoing projects that, in the spirit of the times, 'seemed to traverse that uncertain space between instruction, the fabricated object and its photographic or textual trace'.

Display Cases:

Texas sketch book: 50 etchings by Robert Jacks

1978

etchings, ed. 3/3

National Gallery of Australia, Canberra

Purchased, 1981

80.3796.1-51

While artist-in-residence at the University of Melbourne, Jacks turned to the drawings he had made in Texas, later recalling, 'The drawings when taken back to New York made no sense, but back in Melbourne were of interest to me again.' Characteristically working across various mediums and applying his familiar serial strategies, Jacks produced a series of fifty small linear etchings that reflected the varied forms of desert cacti and patterns of the landscape – subsequently bound and known as the *Texas sketch book* – as well as fifty watercolours and graphite drawings each.

1–12

1969

set of artist's books: (1-5) offset lithographs, 24 pages, cardboard cover, stapled binding; (6) pencil, 24 pages, paper cover, stapled binding

Estate of the artist, Victoria

Listings

1970

artist's book: typewriting and pencil, 92 pages, buckram and cardboard cover, stitched and glued binding

Estate of the artist, Victoria

Jacks produced an extensive body of artist's books throughout his career. Some were unique, while others were made in limited editions in the tradition of the fine art press. Alternatively, many of the books made during Jacks's years in Toronto and New York were inexpensively produced – either offset printed or photocopied – in unlimited quantities and given away at exhibitions, in his words, 'so that an art work or part of it could be available to anyone who was interested'.

A-Z

1971

collage, pen and ink, pencil, coloured pencil, Letraset, rubber stamps on 27 sheets

Estate of the artist, Victoria

Untitled

1972

watercolour and punched holes on 26 paired sheets

Estate of the artist, Victoria

Jacks's studio practice was characterised by a seemingly boundless creative energy, which saw him work across a vast variety of formats and experiment with a diverse array of materials. Avoiding easy categorisation, this piece relates directly to his artist's books but also shows his love of manipulating form and colour, as well as his willingness to vary the modes of presentation of his work. During the years Jacks lived overseas and moved between various rented studios, paper-based works had the added advantage of being inexpensive to produce and relatively easy to transport.

**Twelve red grids hand stamped New York
1973**

1973

artist's book: rubber stamps printed in red ink,
26 pages, cardboard cover, stapled and taped
binding

Estate of the artist, Victoria

Installations 1971–73

1974

artist's book: offset lithographs, 32 pages, cardboard cover, stapled binding

Estate of the artist, Victoria

Twelve drawings hand stamped New York 1974

1974

artist's book: rubber stamps printed in black ink, 24 pages, cardboard cover, stapled and taped binding

Estate of the artist, Victoria

Colour book hand stamped New York 1975

1975

artist's book: rubber stamps printed in coloured inks, 30 pages, cardboard cover, stapled and taped binding

Estate of the artist, Victoria

1975–1976 hand stamped New York

1975–76

artist's book: rubber stamps printed in red and black ink, 24 pages, cardboard cover, stapled and taped binding

Estate of the artist, Victoria

**Lines dots hand stamped Austin Texas
1976**

1976

artist's book: rubber stamps printed in
coloured inks, 24 pages, cardboard cover,
stapled and taped binding

Estate of the artist, Victoria

Red diagonals

1976

artist's book: offset lithographs printed in red
ink, 32 pages, cardboard cover, stapled and
taped binding

Estate of the artist, Victoria

Jacks (Red book)

1977

artist's book: photocopies, 30 pages, paper cover, stapled and taped binding

Estate of the artist, Victoria

Lines dots number two hand stamped Houston Texas 1977

1977

artist's book: rubber stamps printed in blue, red and green ink, 24 pages, cardboard cover, stapled and taped binding

Estate of the artist, Victoria

Rubber stamps

1977

artist's book: rubber stamps printed in coloured inks, 144 pages, buckram and cardboard cover, stitched and glued binding

Estate of the artist, Victoria

Colour book (Series 2, blue)

1977–85

artist's book: watercolour on drafting paper, 88 pages, buckram and cardboard cover, elastic cord binding

Estate of the artist, Victoria

Dots hand stamped New York 1978

1978

artist's book: rubber stamps printed in coloured inks, 24 pages, cardboard cover, stapled and taped binding

Estate of the artist, Victoria

Vertical and horizontal hand stamped Melbourne 1978

1978

artist's book: rubber stamps printed in coloured inks, 24 pages, cardboard cover, stapled and taped binding

Estate of the artist, Victoria

Red dots hand stamped Sydney 1979

1979

artist's book: rubber stamps printed in red ink, 24 pages, cardboard cover, stapled and taped binding

Estate of the artist, Victoria

Black lines hand stamped Sydney 1980

1980

artist's book: rubber stamps, 24 pages, cardboard cover, stapled and taped binding

Estate of the artist, Victoria

Green lines hand stamped Sydney 1981

1981

artist's book: rubber stamps printed in green ink, 24 pages, cardboard cover, stapled and taped binding

Estate of the artist, Victoria

Right ... Left hand stamped Sydney 1982

1982

artist's book: rubber stamps printed in coloured inks, 24 pages, cardboard cover, stapled and taped binding

Estate of the artist, Victoria

Colour book (Series 3, red)

2007

artist's book: watercolour, 40 pages, buckram
and cardboard cover, metal bolt binding

Estate of the artist, Victoria

Various artists

Fifty four pages

1978

artist's book: photocopies, 108 pages,
cardboard cover, stapled and taped binding
compiled by Carol Bruns and Robert Jacks

Estate of the artist, Victoria
