

ROBERT HUNTER

ARTWORK LABELS

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This exhibition surveys the work of Robert Hunter (1947–2014), an artist with whom the National Gallery of Victoria had a long association. In 1968, at twenty-one, Hunter was the youngest artist to participate in *The Field* exhibition, which announced the arrival of international-style, late-modernist abstraction in Australia. In the same year, the NGV acquired Hunter's hard-edge abstract painting *Untitled*, 1968, from his first solo exhibition.

In a career spanning almost five decades, Hunter developed an idiosyncratic visual language that drew upon the logic of Minimalism. Using a basic geometric lexicon and everyday materials such as house paint and masking tape, he endlessly reinvented the modernist grid. From his earliest near-white square canvases to the wall paintings that dominated much of his output in the 1970s to the finely nuanced white-on-white compositions of the mature works for which he is now best known, he produced a remarkably consistent body of work.

Hunter's paintings trace a fine balance between apparent contradictions – complexity and simplicity, colour and its absence, excess and reduction, the everyday and the existential. Notoriously resistant to photographic reproduction, they test the very limits of visual perception, slowly revealing their intricacies to an actively engaged viewer.

Robert Hunter's uncompromising vision and commitment to a singular aesthetic position is unique in Australian art..

Each of the paintings assembled in this room was included in Robert Hunter's first solo exhibition at Tolarno Galleries in May 1968. Based on an implied grid of simple geometric forms and characterised by finely nuanced chromatic transitions, this first major body of work established the guiding principles that would sustain the artist's entire career. These paintings reflected a tendency towards hard-edge abstraction prevalent in certain artistic circles in Melbourne at the time, as well as the influence of the monochromatic black paintings of Ad Reinhardt, which Hunter first saw in the touring exhibition *Two Decades of American Painting* at the NGV in 1967.

No. 4 untitled painting

1968

synthetic polymer paint on canvas

Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane

Purchased 1987

1987.144

Untitled

1968

synthetic polymer paint on canvas

Private collection, Brisbane

Untitled no. 8

1968

synthetic polymer paint on canvas

National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne

Gift of N. R. Seddon, 1968

1827-5

Untitled

1968

synthetic polymer paint on canvas

Private collection, Melbourne

Untitled painting no. 11

1968

synthetic polymer paint on canvas

Monash University Collection, Melbourne

Purchased 1968

1968.4

Untitled painting no. 10

1968

synthetic polymer paint on canvas

Private Collection, Canberra

Untitled

1968

synthetic polymer paint on canvas

Collection of Michael and Manuela Darling, Sydney

No. 6 untitled painting

1968

synthetic polymer paint on canvas

Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney

Gift of Georgina Carnegie 1984

104.1984

Untitled

1966

synthetic polymer paint on canvas

Wesfarmers Collection, Perth

Robert Hunter is best known for his white-on-white paintings; however, colour always plays an important role, even when rendered so subtly that it is almost imperceptible. This early painting, made while Hunter was a student, suggests he was influenced by the colour theories of the Bauhaus artist Josef Albers. For others, however, his choice of colour reflected a more vernacular association, as the Australian curator John Stringer observed: 'The colours all seem to come out of that ... suburban predilection for pastel shades, which [Hunter] used with a forcefulness quite alien to the otherwise timid overtones of the colours themselves'.

Untitled painting

1969

synthetic polymer paint on canvas

Kerry Stokes Collection, Perth

2002.077

Untitled painting no. 1

1969

synthetic polymer paint on canvas

Kerry Stokes Collection, Perth

1993.002

Untitled

1968

synthetic polymer paint on canvas

Private collection, Brisbane

Untitled

1969

synthetic polymer paint on canvas

Collection of Michael and Manuela Darling, Sydney

Untitled

1971

synthetic polymer paint on wall

Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane

The James C. Sourris, AM, Collection. Gift of James C. Sourris, AM, through the Queensland Art Gallery Foundation 2012. Donated through the Australian Government's Cultural Gifts Program

2012.467

Between 1970 and 1980, Hunter made seventeen wall paintings, including for exhibitions at Lisson Gallery in London, Galerie Konrad Fischer in Dusseldorf and the Museum of Modern Art in New York. Due to their ephemeral nature and limited documentation, however, it is difficult to provide a comprehensive overview of this period in Hunter's career – only two of his known wall works have adequate documentation to enable their reconstruction in this exhibition.

This work was first shown in Hunter's first solo exhibition at Pinacotheca Gallery in Melbourne, in 1971, and was shown at the Second Indian Triennial in New Delhi in the same year.

Untitled

1981

synthetic polymer paint on canvas, cotton thread

Geelong Gallery, Victoria

Purchased with the assistance of the Visual Arts Board Australia Council and the Caltex-Victoria
Government Art Fund, 1985

1985.11

Untitled

1970

synthetic polymer paint and masking tape on paper

National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne

Purchased, 1977

A2.a-f-1977

This work was first exhibited in 1970 at the opening exhibition of the Melbourne commercial gallery Pinacotheca, when it moved from St Kilda to Richmond. Made from large sheets of painted paper and masking tape, it signals Hunter's interest in Conceptual art and Minimalism through its reductive aesthetic, serial nature and tendency towards ephemerality. Hunter originally intended that the work would be discarded at the end of the exhibition; however, the original was salvaged by Pinacotheca director Bruce Pollard and later acquired by the NGV, in 1977. Surviving documentation suggests that theoretically it could be remade.

Untitled

1976

synthetic polymer paint on wall

Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney

Purchased 1975

207.1976

Untitled

1970–76

synthetic polymer paint, cotton thread and pencil on canvas

National Gallery of Australia, Canberra
Purchased 1976

76.344

A rare and singular work in Hunter's oeuvre, this painting marks the artist's first use of cotton thread as a compositional device. It conveys a sense of fragility that anticipates qualities found in Hunter's paintings from the mid 1980s onwards. The use of pencil, wavering lines and subdivision of the grid into rectangular units shares a certain kinship with the paintings of American abstract painter Agnes Martin, although it is unknown whether her works were a conscious point of reference for Hunter.

Untitled

1977

synthetic polymer paint on canvas, cotton thread

Art Gallery of Ballarat, Victoria

Purchased with the assistance of the Visual Arts Board, Australia Council, 1978

1978.102

After mostly making ephemeral works in the 1970s, Hunter returned to canvas towards the end of the decade, producing a series of elongated grey paintings that incorporated geometric compositions defined by cotton thread. Like his wall paintings, these works maintained a reductive aesthetic and a Minimalist adherence to the grid as seen in this early example. Hunter exhibited several paintings in this style in a series of joint exhibitions with the American Minimalist sculptor Carl Andre in Melbourne, Newcastle and Brisbane in 1978. He also produced several smaller works on board in this style while living in New York in 1979.

This room contains archival material that relates to Robert Hunter's activities in the late 1960s and throughout the 1970s. It includes documents relating to key exhibitions from this period and photographic reproductions of a number of wall paintings by the artist that no longer exist.

The Field exhibition catalogue, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, 1968

Robert Hunter *Untitled*, 1970, and Robert Rooney *Superknit 1*, 1969 (both NGV Collection), group exhibition, Pinacotheca, Melbourne, 1970. Photograph courtesy Pinacotheca archive. Reprinted 2018

Installation view of *Untitled*, 1970, in the exhibition *Minimal Art*, National Gallery of Victoria, 1976. Photography NGV 1976. Reprinted 2018

'Pinacotheca group exhibition, June, Melbourne' review by Terry Smith in *Other Voices*, vol. 1, no. 2, August/September 1970. Courtesy Pinacotheca archive

Robert Hunter installing *Untitled*, 1971, in the Second Indian Triennial at the Lalit Kala Academy, New Delhi, 1971. Photograph courtesy Monash University Museum of Art

Australia 1971 Robert Hunter, exhibition catalogue, Second Indian Triennial, Lalit Kala Academy, New Delhi, 1971. Courtesy Pinacotheca archive

Installation view of Robert Hunter *Untitled*, 1971, in the Second Indian Triennial, Lalit Kala Academy, New Delhi, 1971. Photograph courtesy Monash University Museum of Art

Details and installation views of Robert Hunter, *Untitled*, 1971, masking tape on wall, Pinacotheca, Melbourne, October 1971. Photographs courtesy Pinacotheca archive

Robert Hunter, *Untitled*, 1973, acrylic on wall, Pinacotheca, Melbourne, 1973. Photograph courtesy Pinacotheca archive

Installation view of *Untitled*, 1976 (detail), Pinacotheca, 1976. Photograph courtesy Pinacotheca archive.
Reprinted 2018

Recent Australian Art, exhibition catalogue, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, 1973. Private Collection, Melbourne

Robert Hunter, *Sydney wall*, 1973, installation view, in the exhibition *Recent Australian Art*, Art Gallery of New South Wales, 1973. Photograph: Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney. Courtesy Monash University Museum of Art

Eight Contemporary Artists, exhibition catalogue, Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1974

Robert Hunter, *Untitled*, 1974, installation view, in *Eight Contemporary Artists*, Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1974. Photograph courtesy Museum of Modern Art, New York. Reprinted 2018

Installation view of *Untitled*, 1975 (detail), Lisson Gallery, London, 1975. Photograph courtesy Lisson Gallery, London. Reprinted 2018

Robert Hunter *Untitled*, 1974 (detail), at Galerie Konrad Fischer, Düsseldorf, 1974. Photograph courtesy Galerie Konrad Fischer. Reprinted 2018

Installation view of Robert Hunter *Untitled*, 1976, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, 1976. Photograph courtesy Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney. Reprinted 2018

Installation view of *Untitled*, 1977, Gunn Hayball Architects, Richmond, Melbourne. Photograph courtesy Monash University Museum of Art

Installation view of Robert Hunter *Untitled*, 1978, in the exhibition *Carl Andre and Robert Hunter*, Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane, 1978. Photograph courtesy Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane. Reprinted 2018

Installation view of Robert Hunter's paintings in the exhibition *Carl Andre and Robert Hunter*, Newcastle Region Art Gallery, 1978. Photograph courtesy Newcastle Region Art Gallery. Reprinted 2018

Installation view of Robert Hunter *Untitled*, 1978, and Carl Andre *Steel Σ 16*, 1978, in the exhibition *Carl Andre and Robert Hunter*, Newcastle Region Art Gallery, 1978. Photograph courtesy Newcastle Region Art Gallery. Reprinted 2018

Installation view of Robert Hunter's paintings in the exhibition *Carl Andre and Robert Hunter*, Newcastle Region Art Gallery, 1978. Photograph courtesy Monash University Museum of Art

Installation view of Carl Andre's installation in the exhibition *Carl Andre and Robert Hunter*, Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane, 1978. Photograph courtesy Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane. Reprinted 2018

Robert Hunter *Five Proposals for Wall Works*, exhibition catalogue, Gallery 321, Brooklyn, New York, 1979. Courtesy Monash University Museum of Art

Robert Hunter interviewed by Hazel de Berg for the Hazel de Berg Collection

Melbourne, 23 November 1969

sound recording

25:55 minutes

Collection of the National Library of Australia

The works assembled in this room represent the evolution of Robert Hunter's painting from the early 1980s until the final years of his life. During this period Hunter worked exclusively with domestic paint rollers on standard plywood sheets to produce a remarkably consistent body of white-on-white paintings distinguished by complex geometric variations, pristine surfaces and finely nuanced chromatic shifts.

Hunter's use of plywood reflected a desire to engage with architectural space by simulating the flatness of a wall, much like his minimalist wall paintings of the 1970s. His pragmatic approach was not only reflected in his choice of materials but also in the way he composed his paintings, which did not privilege one element over another. 'All I was doing was balancing out colours and forms so that nothing had any precedence', he once explained. 'Just the physical existence of the thing was all that was important'.

Painting within strict limitations paradoxically gave the artist the freedom to paint intuitively and generate seemingly infinite aesthetic possibilities. The simple materials, workmanlike process and restrictive parameters enabled him to remove conscious decision-making as if he were a conduit to an unseen force. 'It's like I'm external to them', he once remarked of his paintings. 'They develop their own assertion and character; their becoming finished is a thing they decide themselves. It's unexplainable'

Untitled

1983–84

synthetic polymer paint on plywood

Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane

Purchased 1991 through the Queensland Art Gallery Foundation

1991.12

Untitled

1984

synthetic polymer paint on plywood

National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne

Presented through The Art Foundation of Victoria by

Dr David Rosenthal, Governor, 1999

1999.258

Untitled no. 4

1985

synthetic polymer paint on plywood

Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney

Gift of Loti Smorgon AO and Victor Smorgon AC, 1995

1995.178

Untitled no. 6 (for Carl)

1985

synthetic polymer paint on plywood

Private collection, Brisbane

Untitled no. 3

1986

synthetic polymer paint on plywood

National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne

Purchased from Admission Funds, 1987

AC2-1987

Untitled no. 1

1987

synthetic polymer paint on plywood

TarraWarra Museum of Art, Healesville

Gift of Eva and Marc Besen AO 2001

2002.039

Untitled no. 3

1987

synthetic polymer paint on plywood

Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney

Rudy Komon Memorial Fund 1987

399.1987

Untitled

1988

synthetic polymer paint on plywood

The University of Melbourne Art Collection, Melbourne

Purchased from the artist 1988, during the artist's term as artist-in-residence

1988/89

1988.0019.000.000

Untitled no. 4

1991

synthetic polymer paint on plywood

Collection of Mary and Peter Nicholson, Melbourne

Untitled no. 4

1991–92

synthetic polymer paint on plywood

Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney

Gift of anonymous donors, 1993

1993.287

Untitled no. 3

1990

synthetic polymer paint on plywood

Collection of Paul and Wendy Bonnici, Melbourne

Untitled no. 6

1995

synthetic polymer paint on plywood

Private collection, Melbourne

Untitled no. 1

1996

synthetic polymer paint on plywood

Private collection, Melbourne

Untitled no.7

1996

synthetic polymer paint on plywood

The Vizard Foundation Art Collection of the 1990s, acquired 1997

On loan to the Ian Potter Museum of Art, the

University of Melbourne

1111.0059.000.000

Untitled

1998

synthetic polymer paint on plywood

National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne

Purchased, 1999

1999.51

Untitled no. 3

2000

synthetic polymer paint on plywood

Private collection, Brisbane

Untitled no. 4

2003

synthetic polymer paint on plywood

Estate of the artist, Melbourne

Untitled no. 2

2005

synthetic polymer paint on plywood

Collection of James C. Sourris, Brisbane

Untitled

2008

synthetic polymer paint on plywood

Collection of Alida Milani, Melbourne

Untitled no. 9

2010

synthetic polymer paint on plywood

Estate of the artist, Melbourne

Untitled no. 2

2012

synthetic polymer paint on plywood

Estate of the artist, courtesy Milani Gallery, Brisbane

Untitled no. 9

2013

synthetic polymer paint on plywood

Estate of the artist, Melbourne