

Collection leads

John Scurry—
small paintings



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COVER
John Scurry
After Rain (detail) 2018
oil on cardboard

Introduction

John Scurry is acclaimed as a painter of quietly composed interiors and enigmatic landscapes. This exhibition of recent, and to date unseen small paintings, takes its lead from Scurry's painting *Winter* 1981 in the Geelong collection and on display here. The studio interior of *Winter* is typically populated with the materials of an artist's working life, and our eye is drawn to the open window and the wintry atmosphere beyond. It is the way in which this painting directs our line of sight into the darkening cloudscape that prompted the Gallery's invitation to John Scurry to exhibit these contemplative private paintings, assembled here as if viewed in a study room.

In private correspondence with Jason Smith, the artist generously offered the following thoughts on the evolution of the small paintings, and shares here that:

In the most prosaic sense they initially developed from the process of an end of day cleaning up of my palette to arrive at an unexpected accumulated dense tone of oil colour. The remains of the day as it were. Somewhere in all of this I decided to put the given colour to a playful and non-directed use by applying it to some postcards in my studio.



Collection leads: John Scurry—small paintings
installation view

Scurry continues:

At first there was no conscious or serious intention of forming a particular image: the process was play bound and the results easily disposed of and the execution quite brief.

The postcards at hand were an easy vehicle for the application of a series of tonal colours over a few days—each colour being random and determined by each day's admixture all applied with palette knife, finger, and in time the occasional brush and rag.

Somewhere in this process over subsequent paintings a more serious engagement took over, and an innate image-forming in the nature of an atmospheric landscape (as I experienced it) became the dominant direction in each work.

At first I was unsure how to estimate these paintings, and they became a sort of private work, a separate but related visual territory to my usual practice. Perhaps it was a privileging of a pre-conscious impetus to doodle or fumble imaginatively.

In time, however, they did fall into what I think for me is an inherent way of picture making—where in the first foray or mark creates an imagined landscape of sorts, an atmospheric space that directs the process towards a resolution and ultimately, for me, a suggestiveness redolent of memory.

Individual titles were arrived at some time after the completion of the paintings, and also as an act of necessity. They reflect perhaps mental musings of when each picture was in progress: thoughts, reminiscences, and associations that adhere to the image.



Distant 2018
oil on cardboard



32



33



34

In conversation—John Scurry and Jason Smith



Mirror 2016
oil on canvas

Jason Smith:

These small private paintings are being seen in public for the first time. You are well known for your refined paintings of your studio interior and still life arrangements, and certain urban and rural environments. When I look at some of your earlier works like *Mirror 2016*, *Red bowl and leaves of lemon 2014*, the same ethereal, suggestive landscapes 'appear' through windows and apertures or in small indistinct postcards and paintings depicted in your works. Can you reflect on the connection of the small paintings to your other works?

John Scurry:

The small paintings I think, relate in the sense that they have come about independently of my ongoing engagement with still life and the depiction of interior spaces, nominally the studio. These previous landscape images operate as secondary images within a composition so that a type of unarticulated correspondence hopefully occurs across and within the pictorial space. A lot of this is improvisational, and playing with what seems to be a reasonable or credible visual proposition is intrinsic to what is sought. The aspect of depicting internal and external landscape spaces whether literal or suggested as in postcards or invented images has long been a factor in my work, a sort of correspondence or linkage between things.

Although the small paintings are a discrete body of work I don't view them as outside my ongoing engagement with deceptive or realist tendencies. What is different here is the fact that they have arrived initially out of admixtures of pigment which from the outset determined a given tonality. In this instance a veering towards softer muted greying colours was a newer path to play with.

I think of these works as ends in themselves and depend on presenting themselves in their physical smallness as invitations to look deeply—at least that was the hope. That these small images be like a palpable window into a world was an ever present murmur in their execution.

Needless to say the making of these works was somewhat liberating in not being anchored to a physical presence and that there was only an abstracted sense of landscape with an implied detail to make manifest.

The painting *Red Bowl and leaves of lemon 2014* has an imagined landscape prominent in the composition, this was arrived at by trial and error to make a 'right' solution help unify the picture. It initially started out image wise as something completely different. Without elaboration, the interconnection of the elements and whatever reverberations they may have is aimed at inviting the viewer to look into the pictorial space of the painting.

In a 2017 introduction by Elizabeth Cross to recent works you exhibited in Canberra, you stated that your paintings 'come from an impulse to depict' and are a 'response to the seen, to the mute presence and suggestiveness of things' —that they result from 'a collapsing together of the moment and memory'. The titles of these small paintings point us directly to readings of landscape or natural phenomena. Is this a case of that convergence of moment and memory?

As earlier information in the introduction for the exhibition states, these small paintings evolved out of a very mundane end of day palette clean up on my part. However they did become in short time serious in intent as an imagining and arriving at a sense of a particular landscape. The titling, generally a bit of an onerous or tedious last minute task, was in most cases here a convergence of memories elicited through the fog of the making process, or sometimes just a self-evident pragmatic decision.

At times, allusion to weather arrived at in a given picture, would fix for me a location or a sensation which then accompanied the final visual destination of the picture.

Many of these mental musings and memories evoked were tangential to the image yet acted I think as guiding prompts to the pictorial results. Somewhere in all of this without making it sound overly complicated, titles were arrived at.

These are landscapes of the mind, not painted *en plein air* outdoors and on site. What about painting and drawing outdoors? Are you strictly an artist of the studio or do you work in the landscape?

Most of my work has been in the traditional genres of still life, landscape and figurative work. My need it seems to be is to have a physical reality to contemplate and navigate to find some relevance and meaning in.

For practical reasons and for an ongoing engagement with seeking creative sustenance in still life (for want of a better descriptor) I work mainly from the day to day immersion in the studio. Space, form and light are at the core of my innate interests as is the desire to create a sense of a tangible presence in the depiction of the everyday. To present a world within the canvas as it were.

I have also over the years painted and drawn outdoors *en plein air* and enjoy particularly the performative in the moment aspect that working in this manner demands. Many of my etchings were initially composed and drawn directly outdoors both in landscape and urban locales. In some sense the making of the small paintings was reminiscent of making prints not only in scale but also in the minutiae of mark, texture and so forth to attempt to create a discrete and enduring presence.



Red bowl and leaves of lemon 2016
oil on canvas

Your paintings of interiors and still life arrangements reveal your exceptional talent as a colourist, and your capacity to infuse your interior spaces with a radiant luminosity and cool, clear air. The small paintings are predominantly tonal and muted in their palette. Did you find working with that restriction to one or two dense tones of accumulated colour liberating?

Yes the restriction of the palette to these dense tones as you call them was liberating, and I have used this word often in describing the making of these works to friends and others. Play was an important element in the making in that being prepared to fail was readily accepted.

Your reputation as a printmaker is as important as your acclaim as a painter. Would you see any connection between the drawing and graphic mark making, and sensuous line work in your etchings and these small, quietly expressive and evocative landscapes?

I think I have inadvertently entered this territory earlier, but emphatically yes, there is I feel a definite and strong connection given that I see myself, or have seen myself as a painter/printmaker wherein drawing is intrinsic to both. My engagement was primarily with etching and intaglio processes and their distinctive graphic and aesthetic profiles. Offering a differing mode of depiction, more a reading of the landscape, the mobile copper etching plate always enabled a chance element to occur and a certain latitude in playing with possibilities when arriving at a version of the image as print.



You Yangs 1 1999
You Yangs landscape 2004
 etchings

Your aesthetic tendency is towards allusion and open-ended narratives in your pictures. Has your image making been influenced by any particular art historical ancestor, or contemporary?

I will admit to allusion and a sort of open ended narrative, but what that narrative implies I can't say or don't know, and perhaps this is the reason we make these things. What I can say is that some of these minglings or jugglings cohering, tend toward a visual meaning. I know that for me the forum of still life offers a sort of neutral space wherein a particular world is reflected upon, transposed with attentiveness and given pictorial autonomy.

As a painter immersed in an ongoing tradition applying paint to canvas, there are obviously many forebears and ancestors as well as contemporary artists that I admire and respect. Too many to make a list of here. From the outset I have always been drawn to the visual rather than conceptual aspect of painting, the 'how' rather than the 'what'. My predilection for the renaissance window space and its continuing manifestation historically from Vermeer to Chardin, through to contemporaries such as Arikha, Lopez-Garcia and Freud to name but a few is re-mediated constantly when looking out.

To the extent of any particular influence I cannot determine. In some cases it's more like finding seemingly like-minded painters who in their distinctive pictures, temperaments and example help salve occasional doubt.



An Assembly 2016
oil on linen

You are an acclaimed jazz guitarist and song-writer. Could you share some of the connections you feel, hear and see between your practice as a musician and your practice as an artist?

With regard to my parallel life as musician and any connection between music and my artwork is difficult to articulate except to say that I have been involved with playing in jazz bands since the mid 1960's' in a semi-professional capacity and like a lot of artists it was something we did. For me it has offered many of opportunities to visit art museums in Europe and America over the decades. To be a bit a bit confessional, it is only in the recent past that I have regarded myself as a legitimate musician and more so on my latter practice as a song writer and composer.

I do feel that there are parallels to be made as musician and artist in that there are discrete bodies of work at play which come from within, from the same sensibility, and there are parallels in the formation and composing of pictures and constructed melodies and compositional form that result.

Strangely the notion of a narrative can develop as a dominant feeling in the development of a musical form, and in a sense feels almost independent of myself. A composition quickly takes a life of its own and in this sense is not unlike a mood or feeling being evoked by adjusting the play of things in a painting.

What is it you like about that space—or that sense of space—between the ordinary and the metaphysical? Your work is redolent of that space.

Metaphysical is not a term I feel I can apply to my work but I understand it coming from outside. There are many secondary things, thoughts, sensations and so on married to the space and represented forms in a still life painting. These machinations or correspondences between things is an ongoing pursuit and ambition for any given painting, and ultimately part of the quest for meaning outside of language. The space hopefully has air in which inanimate objects and forms have a palpable presence and are affirming.



Studio interior with AM 2000
etching



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Recent paintings—Elizabeth Cross

While he is also a painter of beautifully nuanced, unassuming landscapes, John Scurry's art is primarily that of the studio interior and still-life. His is an art at once urban and urbane.

These interiors—and the still-lives that inhabit them—are of the artist's studio and its resident population of objects, both mundane and idiosyncratic, to which Scurry returns again and again. It is in the banal and overlooked things—the insignificant objects of modern life—that he finds his true metier. In the exquisite precision of his painting, his cool palette and ironic juxtapositions there is at once tenderness and detachment, a poetry of the every-day.

In some paintings the interior and exterior worlds touch. The quiet, contemplative life of the studio, the carefully placed or suddenly noticed things—a discarded light bulb, a paper coffee cup, an empty frame—are ironically displaced by the passing and sometimes unexpected life outside the studio window. In such paintings two worlds collide; they evoke a dialogue between states of being, between the internal and external worlds, of self and other—albeit characteristically wryly observed.

While Scurry notes that though 'touched by several of the 'isms' that pervaded the art world since the 1960s', he established himself as a 'somewhat independent artist ... drawn innately to the primacy of the visual world'. He observes, when pushed, that his paintings 'come from an impulse to depict' and are a 'response to the seen, to the mute presence and suggestiveness of things'—that they result from 'a collapsing together of the moment and memory'.

And so Scurry's art often juxtaposes narratives as mysterious as the presence of still-life elements transformed beyond the quotidian by his meticulous painterly rendering. His is a world acutely observed, familiar though often unsettling, and not infrequently charged with an undercurrent of laconic wit.

Elizabeth Cross, May 2017

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This text accompanied John Scurry's 2017 exhibition
at Nancy Sever Gallery, Canberra.



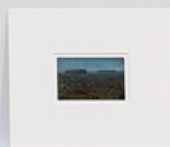
Points of Departure 2016
oil on linen



1



2



3



4



5



6

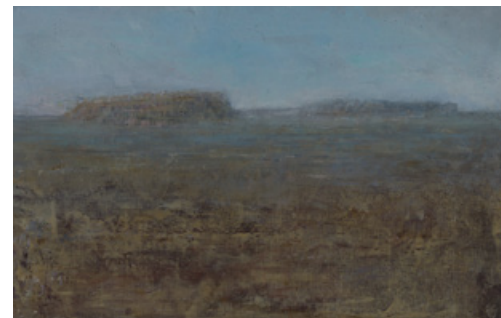
Images



Cat. no. 1
Northern 2018



Cat. no. 2
1967 2018



Cat. no. 3
Island 2018



Cat. no. 4
Towards 2018



Cat. no. 5
Ruffy 2018



Cat. no. 6
After Rain 2018



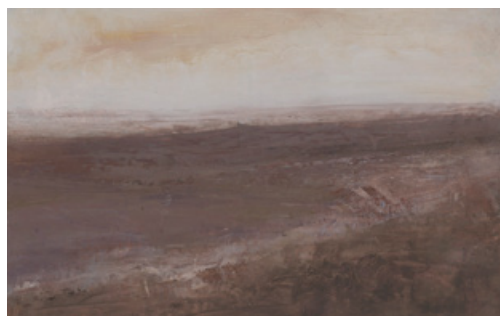
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Sultry 2018



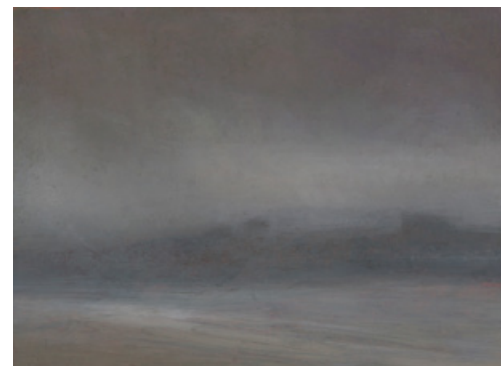
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Dusk 2018



Cat. no. 9
Tropical 2018



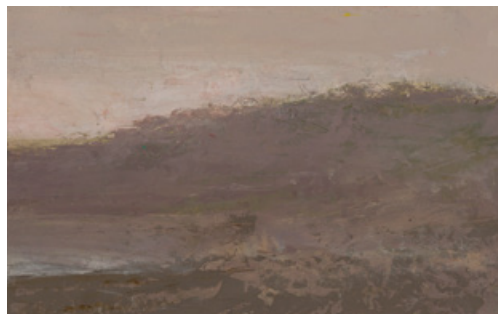
Cat. no. 10
Wintered 2018



Cat. no. 11
Tidal 2018



Cat. no. 12
Lowlands 2018



Cat. no. 13
Coast 2018



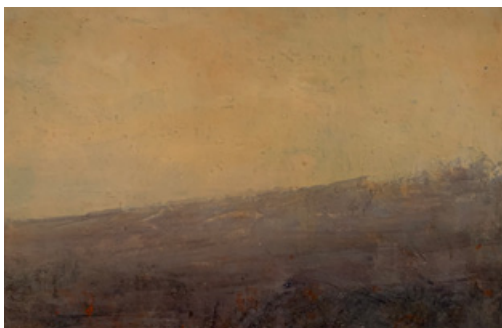
Cat. no. 14
Lilian 2018



Cat. no. 15
Fading 2018



Cat. no. 16
Aftermath 2018



Cat. no. 17
Passing 2018



Cat. no. 18
Cattle 2018



Cat. no. 19
Thames 2018



Cat. no. 20
Rajastani 2018



Cat. no. 21
Plain 2018



Cat. no. 22
Early 2018



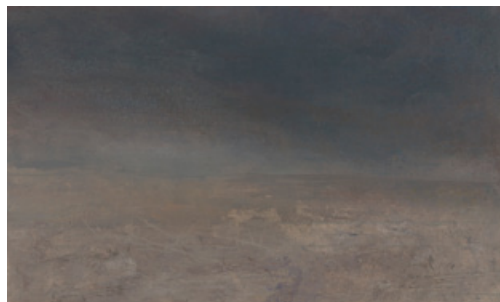
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In England 2018



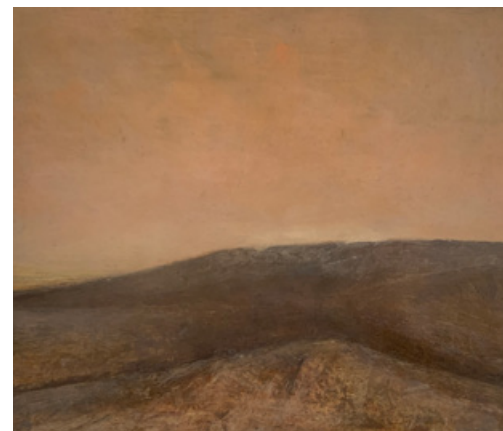
Cat. no. 24
Distant 2018



Cat. no. 25
Wash 2018



Cat. no. 26
Biblical 2018



Cat. no. 27
Rising 2018



Cat. no. 28
Ayr 2018



Cat. no. 29
Alpine 2018



Cat. no. 30
Ridge 2019



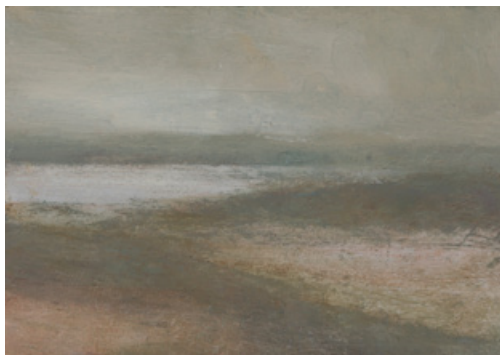
Cat. no. 31
Mapping 2018



Cat. no. 32
Stony 2018



Cat. no. 33
Nordic 2018



Cat. no. 34
Glimmering 2018



Cat. no. 35
North 2019 2019



Cat. no. 36
Settlement 2019



Cat. no. 37
Almost Dark 2019



Cat. no. 38
Winter 1981
oil on canvas
Geelong Gallery
Purchased 1982



Cat. no. 39
An Assembly 2016
oil on canvas
Courtesy of the artist



List of works

John Scurry
born Melbourne, Australia, 1947;
lives and works in Melbourne, Victoria

all works oil on cardboard and
courtesy of the artist

Cat. no. 1
Northern 2018

Cat. no. 2
1967 2018

Cat. no. 3
Island 2018

Cat. no. 4
Towards 2018

Cat. no. 5
Ruffy 2018

Cat. no. 6
After Rain 2018

Cat. no. 7
Sultry 2018

Cat. no. 8
Dusk 2018

Cat. no. 9
Tropical 2018

Cat. no. 10
Wintered 2018

Cat. no. 11
Tidal 2018

Cat. no. 12
Lowlands 2018

Cat. no. 13
Coast 2018

Cat. no. 14
Lilian 2018

Cat. no. 15
Fading 2018

Cat. no. 16
Aftermath 2018

Cat. no. 17
Passing 2018

Cat. no. 18
Cattle 2018

Cat. no. 19
Thames 2018

Cat. no. 20
Rajastani 2018

Cat. no. 21
Plain 2018

Cat. no. 22
Early 2018

Cat. no. 23
In England 2018

Cat. no. 24
Distant 2018

Cat. no. 25
Wash 2018

Cat. no. 26
Biblical 2018

Cat. no. 27
Rising 2018

Cat. no. 28
Ayr 2018

Cat. no. 29
Alpine 2018

Cat. no. 30
Ridge 2019

Cat. no. 31
Mapping 2018

Cat. no. 32
Stony 2018

Cat. no. 33
Nordic 2018

Cat. no. 34
Glimmering 2018

Cat. no. 35
North 2019 2019

Cat. no. 36
Settlement 2019

Cat. no. 37
Almost Dark 2019

Cat. no. 38
Winter 1981
oil on canvas
Geelong Gallery
Purchased 1982

On loan in the neighbouring gallery

Cat. no. 39
An Assembly 2016
oil on canvas
Courtesy of the artist



Biography

John Scurry
born Melbourne, Australia, 1947;
lives and works in Melbourne, Victoria

Selected solo exhibitions

2017
Recent work, Nancy Sever
Gallery, Canberra

2012
John Scurry: Paintings,
Chapman Gallery, Canberra

2011
Recent work, MARS Gallery,
Melbourne

2006
Recent work, MARS Gallery,
Melbourne

2003
Joshua McClelland Print Room,
Melbourne

2000
Joshua McClelland Print Rooms,
Melbourne

1999
AXIA Modern Art, Melbourne

1995
Australian Galleries, Melbourne

1992
Powell Street Graphics, Melbourne

1990
Powell Street Gallery, Melbourne

1986
Powell Street Gallery, Melbourne

1984
Powell Street Gallery, Melbourne

1983
Powell Street Gallery, Melbourne

1981
Powell Street Gallery, Melbourne

1975
Stuart Gerstman Gallery, Melbourne

Selected group exhibitions

2019
Paper Walls, Glen Eira City Council
Gallery, Melbourne

2017
9 x 5, Margaret Lawrence Gallery,
Victorian College of the Arts,
University of Melbourne, Melbourne

Blue chip XIX: The collectors' exhibition,
Niagara Galleries, Melbourne

Romancing the skull, Art Gallery of
Ballarat, Victoria

2012
Dobell drawing prize, Art Gallery of
New South Wales, Sydney

2011
Dobell drawing prize, Art Gallery of
New South Wales, Sydney

2010
*Constellations, A Large Number of Small
Drawings*, RMIT Gallery, RMIT University,
Melbourne

In the kitchen sink, MARS Gallery,
Melbourne

2008
Dobell drawing prize, Art Gallery of
New South Wales, Sydney

7th drawing biennale, Drill Hall Gallery,
Australian National University, Canberra

Snap freeze: still life now,
TarraWarra Museum of Art, Victoria

MARS goes to treasury place, Treasury
Place, Melbourne

2005
The launch, MARS Gallery, Melbourne

One square foot, MARS Gallery, Melbourne

2001
Dobell drawing prize, Art Gallery of
New South Wales, Sydney

Fremantle print prize, Fremantle,
Western Australia

2000
Desire, RMIT Gallery, RMIT University,
Melbourne

Melbourne International Art Fair,
Melbourne

1997
The real thing, Heide Museum of
Modern Art, Melbourne

1994
Unpeeled art, Art Gallery of Ballarat,
Victoria

Archibald Prize, Art Gallery of
New South Wales, Sydney

1993
*Arrangement: Australian still life
1973–1993*, Heide Museum of
Modern Art, Melbourne

Dobell drawing prize, Art Gallery of
New South Wales, Sydney

1991
Something to do with the sea,
Powell St Gallery, Melbourne

1990
It all starts here,
Powell St Gallery, Melbourne

1988
New work, Powell St Gallery, Melbourne

1987–90
Young Australians, National Touring
Exhibition

1983
Faces and figures drawn from life,
Heide Museum of Modern Art, Melbourne

1981
McCaughy Prize exhibition, National
Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne

Aspects of realism, National Gallery of
Victoria, Melbourne

1977
Spring festival of drawing, Mornington
Peninsula Regional Gallery, Victoria

1977
East coast drawing, Institute of
Modern Art, Brisbane

1976
Women in art, Western Australia
Institute of Technology, Perth

1974
3 + 3 + 1 + 3, Powell St Gallery,
Melbourne

1969
Three-man exhibition, Gallery 99,
Melbourne

Collections

ANZ Bank Collection
Artbank
Art Gallery of New South Wales
Australia Club
Art Gallery of Ballarat
Bendigo Art Gallery
Canberra School of Arts
Castlemaine Art Gallery
Deakin University
Devonport Art Gallery and Museum
Federation University
Geelong Gallery
Lander & Rogers
National Gallery of Australia
National Gallery of Victoria
Newcastle Art Gallery
Print Council of Australia
Shell Australia Art Collection
State Library of Victoria
University of Melbourne
University of Vilnius, Lithuania
University of Western Australia
Victorian College of the Arts
Western Mining Corporation
Private collections

Commissions

1991
Portrait of Prof. J Hurley, Department
of Pathology, Faculty of Medicine,
University of Melbourne

1988
John Bourne and Associates

1986
Portrait of Mr. Maxwell Hooper,
Gippsland Institute of Advanced
Education

1984
Portrait of Bishop of Canberra,
Anglican Archdiocese, Canberra

1980
Portrait of Merrimee Family, French
Embassy, Canberra

1979
Portrait of John Nathan, College of
Optometry, University of Melbourne

1979
Print Council of Australia

1979
Portrait of Sir Douglas Menzies,
Monash University

1978
Portrait of Emeritus Professor H.
Atkinson, Dental School, University
of Melbourne

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A Geelong Gallery exhibition

14 September to 24 November 2019

Curator: Jason Smith,
Director & CEO, Geelong Gallery

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Andrew Curtis p. 3, 5, 7, 11, 13, 30, 31

Exhibition partner






**Visit us**

Geelong Gallery is located on
Johnstone Park. The entrance is at
55 Little Malop Street, in Geelong's
arts precinct.

Travelling by train—
a 3 minute walk through Johnstone
Park from Geelong Railway Station.

Travelling by car—
60 minutes from Melbourne CBD.

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