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Mary Cecil Allen: Modernism and Modernity in Melbourne 1935-1960

ABSTRACT

Mary Cecil Allen (1893-1962) was an Australian artist and art educator who moved to New York in 1927, where she became a lecturer and exhibited in leading galleries and museums. Although a resident of the United States until her death, Allen returned to Melbourne in 1935-36, 1950 and 1959-60, becoming an advocate of modern art and a symbol of modernity. On each occasion, she attracted large audiences to her lectures on modernism and controversially exhibited her latest work, thereby exerting a considerable influence on attitudes towards modern art in Melbourne. As a glamorous and confident modern woman, she came to represent the seductive vitality of American modernity and acted as a vehicle of Americanisation. This article examines these three visits, tracing Allen's activities and reception, and situating them within a wider cultural context.

Introduction

Mary Cecil Allen was a Melbourne-born artist and critic who moved to New York in 1927 where she became a prominent art educator (Fig. 1). While living overseas, she repudiated the conservatism of her Australian art training, and embraced the modernist styles dominating European and American art. Although she was a resident of the United States for the rest of her life (she died in 1962), Allen returned to Melbourne in 1935-36, 1950 and 1959-60. This article will first examine Allen's theorisation of modernism and her embodiment of modern womanhood, and then trace how these were received on her three visits to Australia. On each occasion she attracted large audiences to her lectures on modern art and controversially exhibited her latest work. A gifted lecturer and a passionate advocate of art education, Allen was renowned for her ability to render modern art comprehensible to a hostile audience. As a result, she played a significant role in popularising modernism in Melbourne, explicating the confronting formal experimentation of the avant-garde while highlighting the links between modern art and the experience of modernity. Although Allen was a well-known and highly respected figure during her lifetime, since her death she has been sidelined by art historians.¹ This can be attributed to the general marginalisation of female artists by early Australian art historians, as well to the tendency within feminist rewritings of Australian art history to valorise a select group of artists, including Margaret Preston, Grace Cossington Smith and Clarice Beckett, at the expense of a more general reappraisal of the contribution of women to Australian art.² I intend, therefore, to extend upon understandings of Allen and her career, particularly in regard to the largely unexamined later period of her life. Allen's visits to Melbourne also provide three snapshots of the development of the modern in Australia. A modernist artist and a modern woman, Allen personally embodied the intersection of modern aesthetics and the world of urban, cosmopolitan modernity.

¹ Allen is mentioned in numerous general surveys of Australian art, but the only scholarly works which investigate her career in any detail are Lloyd, 1996 and Chanin, 2008, both brief articles focused upon the 1930s.

² For a more detailed critique of feminist rewritings of Australian art history, see Jordan, 1996, p. 474; Peers, 1999, p. 30; Peers, 2000a, p. 214; Peers, 2000b; Lloyd, 1996, pp. 481-82; Hunt, 2004; Speck, 1996.

Aesthetic modernism, in its elite and popular manifestations, both responded to and shaped the experience of twentieth-century modernity as an urban, fast-paced, spectacularised world of mass culture, consumption and sensory stimulation.³ Using Allen and her educational endeavours as a point of reference, I will explore this interrelationship in mid twentieth-century Melbourne.

In particular, Allen's experience highlights the manner in which the modern has been understood and contested in gendered terms. In Europe and the United States, aesthetic modernism was traditionally associated with heroic masculinity, whilst the modernity of mass culture and the modern city was often conceptualised via feminine metaphors, and symbolised by the icon of the modern woman.⁴ Allen, a modern woman and a modernist artist, was situated at the juncture of this binary, and her visits to Melbourne thus provide a fertile basis to investigate the gendering of the modern in Australia. Debate has long raged about whether Australian modernism was imported or home-grown, and the degree to which Australia was receptive towards international developments in modern aesthetics and culture.⁵ Of particular significance has been the influence of America. As many have noted, in twentieth-century Australia it was often difficult to distinguish modernisation from Americanisation.⁶ Allen, as a modernist resident of the United States, was inevitably an actor within this cultural interchange, and her experience therefore sheds light on the anxieties and excitements which accompanied the processes of Americanisation.

Australian Beginnings

Allen's passion for art and education can be traced to her upbringing in a Melbourne academic family. Born in 1893, the second child of Harry and Ada Allen, she grew up in a professorial house in the University of Melbourne, where her father was the Dean of Medicine. Mary and her two sisters, Edith Margaret and Beatrice, received a comprehensive private education, and their mother frequently entertained members of Melbourne's intellectual elite.⁷ In 1910 Mary qualified to begin a Bachelor of Arts at the University, but she decided instead to enter the National Gallery of Victoria (NGV) Art School. Aside from a year at the Slade School of Fine Art in London in 1912, Allen studied at the NGV, where she was a talented and popular student, until 1917.⁸ Joan Lindsay recalled, 'we students in the lunch hour used to flock around Mary like hungry sparrows picking up the crumbs of her wit and wisdom.'⁹ Although she excelled at her studies, Allen later regretted her long association with this conservative institution, where Bernard Hall and Frederick McCubbin taught students according to rigid academic conventions and viewed innovation with suspicion.¹⁰

³ See, for instance, Felski, 1995, pp. 1-34; Felski, 2000; Friedman, 2001; Berman, 1982, pp. 15-36; Beilharz, 2006; Dixon and Kelly, 2008; Singer, 2001, pp. 17-35; Hansen, 1999, pp. 59-60.

⁴ See, for instance, Pollock, 2003, p. 71; Scott, 1990, p. 2; Felski, 1995, pp. 19-90; Gillespie, 2007, p. 766; Conor, 2004, pp. 46-48; Barlow et al, 2005, p. 247.

⁵ For two opposing perspectives on this debate, see Chanin and Miller, 2005, pp. 29, 42, 58 and Williams, 1995, pp. 5, 11.

⁶ Bell and Bell, 1993, p. 69; Lees and Senyard, 1987, p. 23.

⁷ UMA, Frances Derham Papers, 'Biography of Mary Cecil Allen', pp. 7-8, 18-20.

⁸ The Argus, 1910, p. 6; SLV, Allen Family Papers, MS 9320, Certificate awarded to Mary Cecil Allen, 1912, Box 3/6.

⁹ UMA, Frances Derham Papers, 'Personal Notes on Mary Cecil Allen', p. 3.

¹⁰ UMA, Frances Derham Papers, 'Biography of Mary Cecil Allen', p. 3.



Fig. 1. Unknown photographer, *Portrait of Mary Cecil Allen*, c1920s. Sepia toned photograph, 24.2 x 19 cm, Canberra, National Library of Australia, image number: nla.pic-an22452836.

During the 1920s, Allen became a rising star of the Melbourne art world. Not only was she a recognised artistic talent, but she also had considerable social prestige. Her father had been knighted in 1914, her exhibitions were opened by notables such as Dame Nellie Melba and University Vice-Chancellor Sir John Grice, and she counted the likes of Ivy Brookes (daughter of Alfred Deakin) among her friends.¹¹ Allen's artwork, focused mainly on portraiture and landscape, appealed to the Melbourne intelligentsia, from whom she received numerous commissions. She was a member of the Australian Art Association, the Victorian Artists' Society and the Twenty Melbourne Painters, and exhibited in numerous group and solo exhibitions, where her work was often singled out for praise by reviewers.¹² In addition, Allen became renowned for her ability to communicate about art. In 1925 she became an art critic with *The Sun*, Melbourne's popular pictorial daily newspaper, the first woman to hold this position, and in 1926 was appointed the first female guide-lecturer at the NGV.¹³ In the 1920s Allen also studied with Max Meldrum, a tonal impressionist whose

¹¹ Lloyd, 1996, p. 484; *The Age*, 1919, p. 9; *The Age*, 1921, p. 9; *The Age*, 1924, p. 7.

¹² See, for instance, *The Age*, 1919, p. 9; *The Argus*, 1918, p. 6; *The Argus*, 1921a, p. 10; *The Argus*, 1921b, p. 9; *The Argus*, 1922, p. 4; *The Argus*, 1923, p. 15.

¹³ Ambrus, 1984, p. 39.

students Arnold Shore and Jock Frater were among the first to experiment with modernism in Melbourne.¹⁴ Allen, however, was not yet among them. In the *Sun* she was critical of Shore's work, and in one lecture asserted that post-impressionists 'create nothing but monsters – they invent the abnormal.'¹⁵

It was her talents as an educator that gave Allen the opportunity to expand her horizons beyond this comfortable, but narrow, milieu. In 1926, Florence Gillies, a visiting American, was so impressed by her lectures that she hired Allen as a personal guide to the galleries of Europe.¹⁶ In late 1927, having spent eight months touring the continent, she was then invited by the Carnegie Trust to lecture in New York. Allen was immediately enamoured of this dynamic modern metropolis. She later recalled, 'I shall never forget my first glimpse of New York, with the sun gilding the tops of the great buildings that pierced the skyline, like an immense range of icebergs.'¹⁷ In 1928 and 1929 Allen gave a series of public lectures, published as *The Mirror of the Passing World* (1928) and *Painters of the Modern Mind* (1929), and in the succeeding years she gave lectures and tours at Columbia University, the Metropolitan and Brooklyn museums, Vassar and Sarah Lawrence colleges, and the New York Academy of Design. She also organised, at the instigation of Herbert Brookes, Australian Commissioner-General to the USA, the first American exhibition dedicated to Australian art.¹⁸ Held at the Roerich Museum in New York in February 1931, the exhibition then toured, accompanied by Allen, to fourteen American cities.¹⁹ In the same year, she was appointed head of the Art Department at Miss Hewitt's School, an exclusive girls' school in New York. Her recent artwork was featured in the Roerich exhibition, and in 1935 she exhibited alongside leading American artists at the Brooklyn Museum.²⁰

Embracing the Modern: 1927-1935

Following her exposure to contemporary European and American painting, Allen made a rapid conversion to modern art. In *Painters of the Modern Mind* she offered an eloquent articulation of a central tenet of modernism: that art should convey ideas, rather than mimic visual reality. Modern art, which she termed 'expressionism', 'disputes and denies the supremacy of the eye in painting', and instead conveys 'a state of mind.' While, this 'denial of optical truth' could produce distortion and the 'grotesque', these elements signified the creativity and imagination of the artist, rather than a diminution of technical skill. The quality of an artwork, therefore, could no longer be judged by its similarity to visible objects, but whether it succeeded in realising the artist's vision. In consequence, Allen characterised modern art as an inherently individualised endeavour, in which the true artist cultivates his or her intuitive vision instead of mimicking the fashionable aesthetic of the moment.²¹

¹⁴ Burdett, 1938, p. 15.

¹⁵ Dedman, 1984, pp. 292-96; SLV, Allen Family Papers, MS 9320, Notes for a Lecture on Modern Art, Box 1/5.

¹⁶ Derham, 1979, p. 46.

¹⁷ The Argus, 1935a, p. 24.

¹⁸ Chanin, 2008, pp. 140-43.

¹⁹ The Art Digest, 1931; New York, 1931.

²⁰ Jewell, 1935, p. 11.

²¹ Allen, 1929, pp. 4-33.

While these statements reflect a fairly standard theorisation of modern art, the idiosyncrasies of Allen's approach can be observed in her emphasis upon three key themes. The first of these is her preoccupation with form. Unlike the contemporaneous German expressionists, and the abstract expressionists who she would later admire, Allen was comparatively uninterested in the depiction of emotional intensity or individual psychology. Although she repeatedly stressed that artworks should reflect the mentality of the artist, this was envisaged as a personalised perception of form – 'a conception of natural objects as the directions of planes in space, expressed by lines, colors [sic], lights and shadows' – rather than an emotional condition.²² In this sense, Allen was self-consciously situating herself in what she understood to be the formalist traditions of Cézanne, Braque and Picasso. Therefore, her use of 'expressionism' can be somewhat misleading, suggesting a highly interiorised, emotionally revealing art, quite divorced from the more abstract intellectualism of her aesthetic theories and personal practice.

Formalism also underpins Allen's second recurring theme: the significance of rhythm. Allen defined rhythm as a 'mental quality' which 'cannot be identified with any particular lines, spaces, colors, or volumes', but is brought about by 'a mental grasp of the inevitable relationship of one element to all the others.' Unlike the principles of design, which could be taught, rhythm 'depends on insight', as it required an artist to depict transitions and relationships which 'cannot be literally be observed and grasped.'²³ Allen implied that rhythm was the ultimate objective of aesthetics, and the truest test of whether an artist could move beyond mere technical proficiency. Thus, once again, she emphasised intuitive expression, but as a means to generate formal elegance rather than mental landscapes.

Finally, Allen's theorisation of modernism had a strong primitivist streak. She drew a connection between the apparently naïve vision of so many modern artists and the unselfconscious art of the child and 'savage', writing:

'When a child draws an angry man's head as an immense irregular oval... he is doing exactly the same thing as the savage who combines crude symbols in a devil mask. Both are engaged in a highly abstract and personal creation.'²⁴

Given that personalised abstraction was, for Allen, the *raison d'être* of modern art, she opposed training children in conventional aesthetic technique and called for the extension of their primitivist tendencies into adult life.²⁵

The principles articulated in *Painters of the Modern Mind* were reiterated by Allen throughout her career, and formed the basis of the numerous lectures she delivered in Australia and the United States. Although her stylistic preoccupations altered, moving increasingly towards abstraction, she continued to emphasise the importance of rhythmic expression and untrammelled individualism. Allen's concern with child and 'primitive' art also continued. She often taught children, for example, and in 1936 she gave classes at Preshil, a progressive school in Melbourne, and frequently discussed

²² Allen, 1929, p. 3.

²³ Allen, 1929, pp. 46-61.

²⁴ Allen, 1929, p. 16

²⁵ Allen, 1929, p. 26.

child art with Frances Derham, who was a pioneer of art education in Melbourne. Her concern with the untutored 'savage' vision most likely also prompted her visits to Central Australia in 1936 and 1950, as well as her interest in Mexican design and aesthetics.²⁶

Within the sphere of twentieth-century modernism, Allen's aesthetic theories were distinctive, yet certainly far from original. Where she was exceptional, however, was in her ability to articulate these concepts to a general audience. Allen believed that art offered 'real and continual nourishment for the minds and hearts of all mankind without distinction of education, class or religious belief,'²⁷ and in New York taught a diverse mix of people, ranging from artists to manual labourers. A lucid writer, she was by all accounts also a charismatic lecturer. Indeed, Joseph Burke later described Allen as 'an apostle of art ... When she taught, the class or lecture room seemed to disappear, and its place was taken by a magic casement opening onto the world of the imagination.'²⁸

During the early 1930s, Allen's embrace of modernism also began to manifest within her personal practice. In 1931 she was profiled in the French modern art journal, *La Revue Moderne*, while her work in the Roerich exhibition was considered the only exception to the prevailing conservatism of Australian painting, described in the *New York Times* as 'arrestingly modern.'²⁹ At the same time, Allen also embraced a modern lifestyle, renting a studio in bohemian Greenwich Village and reportedly embarking upon a sexual liaison.³⁰ During the summers, she travelled to Europe and throughout the United States.³¹ However, this freedom and independence came at a cost. Allen often experienced financial hardship and later noted that, 'the life of a single woman earning her living in New York is a very strenuous one.'³²

The trajectory of Allen's early career was mirrored by a considerable number of her better-known female contemporaries. Anne Dangar, Grace Crowley, Margaret Preston, Dorrit Black and Thea Proctor all made a departure from early twentieth-century Australia, embraced modernism whilst overseas, and eventually returned to champion modern art at home. Given the parallels in their experience, it is striking that Allen had no recorded contact with any of these individuals, particularly as Helen Topliss has indicated that networks of communication and support were common among female modernists of this era.³³ This can be partially explained by the notorious divisions between the Melbourne and Sydney art worlds. Dangar, Crowley and Proctor all hailed from New South Wales, and were later joined in Sydney by South Australians Preston and Black. Allen, meanwhile, remained firmly situated within a Melbourne-based milieu. Although she planned an exhibition for Sydney in 1950, this was cancelled when her sister became unwell. Allen's lack of engagement

²⁶ For a description of this interest, see UMA, Frances Derham Papers, Letter from Mary Cecil Allen to Frances Derham, New Mexico, 10 August 1947.

²⁷ UMA, Frances Derham Papers, Mary Cecil Allen, 'Art and the Nature of Man'.

²⁸ UMA, Frances Derham Papers, 'Program of the 1963 Mary Cecil Allen Memorial Lecture.'

²⁹ Allen, 1929, pp. 3-37; *La Revue Moderne*, 1931, p. 19. Jewell, 1931a, p. 38. For commentary on this exhibition, see Jewell, 1931b, p. 116; *Bulletin of the Milwaukee Art Institute*, 1931, p. 2.

³⁰ UMA, Frances Derham Papers, 'Personal Notes on Mary Cecil Allen', p. 10.

³¹ *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 1935, p. 4.

³² UMA, Frances Derham Papers, 'Biography of Mary Cecil Allen', p. 49.

³³ Topliss, 1996, pp. 89, 153, 159, 174.

with these Sydney-based modernists can also be attributed to her years in New York, and subsequent removal from developments in the Australian art world. Finally, whereas Allen made her conversion to modernism in the United States, her female contemporaries received a European art education, further decreasing the likelihood that their paths would intersect. Allen did, however, have some contact with Melbourne-based female modernists, including Isabel Tweddle, Helen Ogilvie and Ola Cohn, via her ongoing association with the Melbourne Society of Women Painters and Sculptors.³⁴ These women were not close associates, though, and did not have any apparent influence on her aesthetic ideas.

Return of the Prodigal Daughter: Melbourne 1935-36

Given the changes in both her lifestyle and artistic allegiances, Allen unsurprisingly generated considerable controversy when she visited Melbourne in 1935. Despite her long absence she had not been forgotten in Australia, and her arrival on 19 July 1935 was widely reported in the local press.³⁵ On the following Saturday, she was the guest of honour at a lavish party hosted by Ivy and Herbert Brookes, at which the Impressionist Arthur Streeton paid tribute to Allen on behalf of the artists of Victoria.³⁶ However, once it became apparent that Allen was now an advocate of all things modern, this enthusiasm transformed into ambivalence.

In inter-war Melbourne, the gatekeepers of the art world were far from sympathetic to modern art. Although Jock Frater and Arnold Shore had been experimenting with modernism since the mid-1920s, Australian painting continued to be dominated by the nationalist pastoral landscapes of Hans Heysen and Arthur Streeton.³⁷ The NGV refused to acquire post-impressionist art, and critics such as J. S. MacDonald and Lionel Lindsay regarded modernism as an 'imported and perverted art,' hailing from 'the dead hand of European decadence.'³⁸ Due to this institutional conservatism, a modern aesthetic developed in advertising, commercial art, fashion and design long before it was accepted within painting.³⁹ Articles on modern craft and design appeared in *The Home*, a sophisticated lifestyle and fashion magazine, while Cynthia Reed's furniture store in Little Collins Street was an important centre of modernist activity.⁴⁰ As a result, the terms 'modernism' and 'modernity' were regularly conflated.⁴¹ Given its association with modern mass culture, modernism in Australia developed strong feminine connotations, which were further exaggerated by the predominance of women among Australian modernists.⁴² Whilst these feminine, and by extension, amateur, connotations were often employed by conservatives to belittle modernist art, they also prevented modernism from posing a significant threat to the 'masculine' tradition of pastoral landscapes.⁴³ Consequently, the work of female modernists such as Preston and Proctor, was tolerated, even encouraged, by critics.⁴⁴

³⁴ SLV, Melbourne Society of Women Painters and Sculptors.

³⁵ The Herald, 1935a, p. 5; The Sun, 1935, p. 42; The Age, 1935a, p. 24; The Argus, 1935a, p. 24.

³⁶ Table Talk, 1935a, p. 39; The Argus, 1935d, p. 3.

³⁷ Jordan, 1993, p. 202; James, 1994, p. 67; Hoorn, 1992, p. 17.

³⁸ MacDonald, 1958, p. 135; Lindsay, 1942, pp. x, 16.

³⁹ Willis, 1993, pp. 144-47; Smith, 2006, pp. 105-108.

⁴⁰ Phipps, 2002, p. 196; Bogle, 1998, pp. 68-70; McDonald, 2008, p. 101.

⁴¹ Stephen, Goad and McNamara, 2009, p. xxv.

⁴² Jordan, 1993, pp. 200-02; Lloyd, 1995, pp. 21, 83-84; Hoorn, 1992, pp. 9-11.

⁴³ Hoorn, 1992, pp. 13, 17.

⁴⁴ Jordan, 1993, pp. 200-06.

By the mid-1930s, however, these circumstances had begun to change. Although artistic activity was concentrated in Sydney, a militant younger generation of modernists was also emerging in Melbourne, led by Sam Atyeo and Adrian Lawlor.⁴⁵ In 1932, George Bell, a convert from academic art, established the Contemporary Art Group and the Bell-Shore Art School, and the following year Alleyne Zander brought a pioneering exhibition of contemporary British painting to Melbourne.⁴⁶ A modern sensibility was also encouraged by journals such as *Recorder* and *Manuscript*, and the Leonardo Art Shop, which stocked books on modern art.⁴⁷ Thus, Allen arrived back in Melbourne when tensions about modernism were running high, as an unthreateningly 'feminine' modern aesthetic was superseded by the confrontational practice of ambitious and predominately male modernists.

Although Allen's modernity would not endear her to the art world, it did bring a touch of glamour to the local social calendar, and she was much fêted by the Melbourne intelligentsia. The Millers, a prominent Melbourne family, organised a reception at their house in Kew, and she was welcomed by artists at a party in Arnold Shore's studio.⁴⁸ Allen was also invited to speak to the National Council of Women of Victoria and Australian Federation of University Women, while the Victoria League Club, the Arts and Crafts Society of Victoria, the International Club and the Melbourne Society of Women Painters all held receptions in her honour.⁴⁹ Meanwhile, she was described in *The Home* as 'quite the most vitally interesting woman who has visited Melbourne for some time,' who 'typifies all the most attractive in modern thought [sic], even to the charming new mode in which she dresses her hair.'⁵⁰ Given that Allen's modern sensibilities had developed in America, it is remarkable that they were greeted with such excitement. Although the interwar Australian elite, who read *The Home* and aspired to be cosmopolitan, pursued modern lifestyles, they preferred to emulate English and European models. America was typically seen as vulgar and commercial, the source of crass popular culture and morally dubious Hollywood films.⁵¹ Allen, however, represented another side of the United States, the glamorous New York 'of dreams come true.'⁵² In speeches and newspaper interviews she characterised her adopted city as a cosmopolitan metropolis of towering skyscrapers, Broadway lights and seductive advertisements. She also emphasised the progressive and egalitarian culture of the city, hinting at the heady freedoms New York offered for women such as herself.⁵³

⁴⁵ Smith, 1936, p. 17; Lloyd, 1995, pp. 82-93; Burdett, 1938a, pp. 15-22; Burdett, 1938b, pp. 14-15. For examples of this new militancy, see Lawlor, 1936, pp. 17-23; Atyeo, 2006, pp. 98-103.

⁴⁶ Casey, 1966, pp. 120-24; McDonald, 2008, p. 101; Burdett, 1936, p. 63. For a detailed description of Zander's exhibition, see Chanin, 2008, pp. 144-49; Zander, 1935, pp. 65-68.

⁴⁷ McDonald, 2008, p. 107; Chanin and Miller, 2005, pp. 113-14.

⁴⁸ *The Home*, 1935a, p. 10; *The Argus*, 1935c, p. 5.

⁴⁹ *The Argus*, 1935j, p. 16; *The Argus*, 1935b, p. 5; *The Argus*, 1935e, p. 19; *The Argus*, 1935k, p. 15; *The Argus*, 1935f, p. 16; *Table Talk*, 1935b, p. 39; *The Herald*, 1935b, p. 16; SLV, Melbourne Society of Women Painters and Sculptors Records, MS 10713, Melbourne Society of Women Painters Report 1935, Box 2/1.

⁵⁰ *The Home*, 1935a, p. 10.

⁵¹ Matthews, 1998, pp. 17-28; White, 1983, pp. 115-17.

⁵² *The Argus*, 1935a, p. 24.

⁵³ *The Advertiser*, 1936a, p. 9; *The Advertiser*, 1936b, p. 8; *The Argus*, 1935b, p. 5; *The Argus*, 1935e, p. 19; *The Sun*, 1935, p. 42.

Given her celebrity in Melbourne, Allen's exhibition at the Fine Art Society's Gallery was a much anticipated event. A large crowd assembled on 20 August to attend the opening, which was so crowded that only those who arrived early were able to view the paintings.⁵⁴ Although the exhibition catalogue and Ivy Brookes' opening address both warned of the dramatic changes in Allen's technique, the Melbourne public were astonished by the forty works on display.⁵⁵ They were modern in both style and content: abstracted depictions of New York skyscrapers and subways. Rather than attempting to produce a realistic likeness of her subject, Allen now employed distortion to evoke 'as accurately as possible its inner and essential quality.'⁵⁶ This technique clearly stemmed from the aesthetic program outlined in *Painters of the Modern Mind*, in which Allen observed that 'the skyscrapers of New York affect the American expressionist...Distortion of some kind is a necessity if he is to express what he is thinking about when he looks at the world around him.'⁵⁷ Her intent, however, was not appreciated by gallery visitors, who interpreted this abandonment of realism as a loss of skill. The *Bulletin* reported that 'the habitual expression of placidity worn by the average art show audience gave way to repressed excitement, almost hysteria.'⁵⁸ Only a few loyal friends purchased paintings, and later admitted that they would not dare hang them at home.⁵⁹ Nonetheless, the exhibition was a *succès de scandale*, becoming 'the week's chief topic of conversation,' and drawing crowds of visitors until it closed on 31 August.⁶⁰

Allen's lectures on modern art at the NGV generated a similar response, attracting audiences of up to a thousand people.⁶¹ The series began on 13 August 1935, with a lecture entitled 'Art and Nature'. Aware that, for most of the audience, modern art 'appeared grotesque and without meaning,' Allen likened modernism to a foreign language, which must be learnt before it can be appreciated.⁶² Using slides of artwork by Cézanne, Van Gogh and Picasso, she explained that modern art aimed to convey ideas, rather than reproduce reality, yet also argued 'there is a beauty in these works.'⁶³ Word soon spread of Allen's 'lucid and challenging' presentation, and her next lectures, on photography and distortion in modern art, attracted record audiences, many of whom could not be seated.⁶⁴

Despite the stir Allen's exhibition and lectures produced, they did not elicit the damning condemnation that one might expect. Given her close association with many influential Melbourne families, as well as leading art figures in America, critics were obliged to at least report Allen's opinions, however much they may have disagreed with her ideas.⁶⁵ Predictably, the most hostile exhibition review came from Arthur

⁵⁴ The Home, 1935b, p. 8.

⁵⁵ SLV, Mary Cecil Allen: Artists and Artists file, Exhibition Catalogue of Mary Cecil Allen at the Fine Arts Society Gallery, 1935; The Argus, 1935g, p. 16.

⁵⁶ SLV, Mary Cecil Allen: Artists and Artists file, Exhibition Catalogue of Mary Cecil Allen at the Fine Arts Society Gallery, 1935.

⁵⁷ Allen, 1929, p. 39.

⁵⁸ The Bulletin, 1935, p. 43.

⁵⁹ Derham, 1979, pp. 46-47.

⁶⁰ The Home, 1935b, p. 8; The Bulletin, 1935, p. 43.

⁶¹ The Home, 1935b, p. 8.

⁶² The Age, 1935b, p. 8; The Age, 1935c, p. 10.

⁶³ The Argus, 1935i, p. 10.

⁶⁴ The Age, 1935c, p. 10; The Age, 1935d, p. 11; The Argus, 1935h, p. 8; The Argus, 1935i, p. 10.

⁶⁵ Lloyd, 1996, p. 484.

Streeton, who characterised her work as outdated—‘very like many canvases exhibited in London 25 years ago’—yet still ‘beyond my perceptive facilities.’⁶⁶ Other reviewers were more ambivalent, expressing reservations about her conversion to modern art, yet acknowledging her underlying talent.⁶⁷ Even arch-conservative Lionel Lindsay described her exhibition as a ‘very stimulating show’, and complimented her ‘very beautiful low-toned colour.’⁶⁸ The modernist Arnold Shore was enthusiastic in his praise, describing Allen’s exhibition as ‘a living demonstration of the courage and diversity of modern practice in art.’⁶⁹ Likewise, although the ideas Allen expressed within her lectures were treated with scepticism, they were nevertheless reported at length, and there was widespread acknowledgement that she was a gifted speaker.⁷⁰ More damning critiques could be expressed privately. Max Meldrum, her old teacher and mentor, crossed the street to avoid her, and even George Bell was reportedly confronted by the level of abstraction within her works.⁷¹

Yet, the dominant response to her espousal of modernism was an air of smug complacency. Gallery visitors were heard to whisper, ‘I could paint better than that myself,’ while the *Age* contrasted the ‘modernist’ with the ‘normalist’, thereby assigning Allen the status of deviant.⁷² Stephanie Taylor, a guide-lecturer at the NGV, lamented Allen’s ‘most unfortunate addiction to modernism’, and confidently predicted that ‘Miss Allen will be won back to academic art if she stays here.’⁷³ This attitude is indicative of the general cultural atmosphere of interwar Australia, which P. R. Stephensen labelled the ‘Dictatorship of the Smug.’⁷⁴ Still dwelling in the halcyon days of the late nineteenth-century, the Australian intelligentsia championed a national identity based around ideas of racial superiority and the masculine virtues of the bush.⁷⁵ Australia was seen as a fresh and unsullied land, happily isolated from the effeminate urban modernity of old Europe, and its associated art of distortion and ‘degeneracy’.⁷⁶

The complacency Allen encountered was not only a product of Australian parochialism, but also a reaction to her gender. She was situated within the sphere of decorative feminine modernism, which neutralised the threat she presented to Australian art orthodoxies, and allowed critics to discuss her work in an indulgent, if somewhat patronising, tone. The *Bulletin* described the forty-three year old Allen as ‘a delightful young woman’, while Lindsay observed that, although ‘Miss Allen has talked and practised many theories of art’, the ‘charm of her colour’ was more significant.⁷⁷ The articles which reported her activities were numerous, yet were often dominated by lengthy descriptions of her outfits, and placed within ladies’ magazines or the women’s section of the newspapers. Meanwhile, she failed to make the pages

⁶⁶ Streeton, 1935, p. 10.

⁶⁷ The *Age*, 1935e, p. 11; Lindsay, 1935, p. 9; The *Bulletin*, 1935, p. 43.

⁶⁸ Lindsay, 1935, p. 9.

⁶⁹ Shore, 1935, p. 30.

⁷⁰ The *Home*, 1935c, p. 8; The *Age*, 1935f, p. 10.

⁷¹ UMA, Frances Derham Papers, Biography of Mary Cecil Allen, p. 11; Lloyd, 1995, p. 97.

⁷² The *Bulletin*, 1935, p. 43; The *Age*, 1935e, p. 11.

⁷³ The *Age*, 1935f, p. 10.

⁷⁴ Stephensen, 1936, p. 88.

⁷⁵ Conor, 2004, pp. 51-59; White, 1981, pp. 140-41.

⁷⁶ Stephenson, 1936, pp. 84-88; White, 1981, pp. 143-46.

⁷⁷ The *Bulletin*, 1935, p. 43; Lindsay, 1935, p. 9.

of the 'high art' journal, *Art in Australia*.⁷⁸ In one exhibition review Allen's paintings were characterised as merely a feature of the decorative scheme, their 'vivid colours' providing a 'striking contrast' to the 'great bowls of exquisite white plum-blossom' and 'lovely Persian rugs.'⁷⁹ The feminine triviality implied by the above was made explicit by Lindsay, who observed in his anti-modernist polemic, *Addled Art* (1942):

To-day there are more women than men painters. They have more leisure, and the superficial nature of modern painting attracts their light hands: picture or hat, all is one. Living close to the moment, and accustomed to follow without questioning any and every mode, they find all styles equally pleasant which have been pronounced 'advanced' and 'the thing'... No exposition of this general attitude of women in modern art could make this clearer than the show of Miss Mary Allen in 1935, when she exhibited works that were lightly rooted in a dozen different sources.⁸⁰

In some respects, Allen herself confirmed conservative prejudices, reinforcing the perception that modernism was the superficial aesthetic of a flighty and feminine modern world. She argued that art was inexorably linked to the era in which it was produced, and described the aesthetic characteristics of modern art as a response to the sensory stimulation of modernity.⁸¹ Indeed, according to Allen, New York had become the international centre of modern art by virtue of its unparalleled modernity.⁸² Also, she was involved with the Arts and Crafts Association of Victoria, and often praised modern interiors and home-wares, thereby suggesting a destabilising subversion of artistic hierarchies, in which art began to blur with commodity, and amateur could no longer be distinguished from professional.⁸³

Yet, whilst replicating the equation of modernism and modernity already evident in Australia, Allen questioned the negative connotations of this relationship, refuting assumptions that modernism was a trivial aesthetic. For instance, in her lectures she claimed that the modernist emphasis on craft and design had precedents within the revered aesthetic traditions of antiquity.⁸⁴ She also challenged the view that modern artists were preoccupied with the 'feminine' skill of coloration, stressing that they also valued the intellectual, 'masculine' virtues of draughtsmanship.⁸⁵ In addition, Allen criticised the marginalisation of women in art, observing in her talk to the Melbourne Society of Women Painters:

It was surprising...to find how favourably women's painting compared with men's when they had sufficient independence to spend all their time on their work and were not forced to fit it in between all sorts of domestic duties. We must look to the future...because women in art have no past.⁸⁶

⁷⁸ This exclusion can also be read as a tacit criticism of her work, for Sydney Ure Smith was well-known for only featuring artists of whom he personally approved, and registering disapproval by omission. See Underhill, 1991, p. 174.

⁷⁹ The Argus, 1935g, p. 16.

⁸⁰ Lindsay, 1942, p. 52.

⁸¹ Allen, 1929, p. 39.

⁸² The Argus, 1935a, p. 24; The Herald, 1935a, p. 5.

⁸³ The Argus, 1935m, p. 16; The Argus, 1935j, p. 16.

⁸⁴ The Argus, 1935l, p. 13.

⁸⁵ The Age, 1935d, p. 11.

⁸⁶ The Argus, 1935k, p. 15.

Furthermore, Allen herself provided an example of a female modernist who could not be contained within a 'feminine' amateur framework; a professional artist and art educator, she worked in the United States under the masculine identity of 'M. Cecil Allen'.⁸⁷

Finally, although trivialised by critics and the press, Allen did exert considerable influence in rendering modernism palatable to artists and the general public. Hundreds attended her exhibition and lectures, and many more read reports of these events. She also taught students at the Bell-Shore School, influencing the early work of Russell Drysdale.⁸⁸ In February 1936, Allen held a popular Summer School for artists at Gisborne, where she became a mentor to the textile designer Frances Burke, who went on to become one of the leading proponents of modernism in Melbourne.⁸⁹ Although the last months of her visit were largely taken up with a sketching tour of Central Australia, Allen's final NGV lecture on 8 July 1936 once again attracted 'an audience so large that many people could not be seated.'⁹⁰ As a result, the *Herald* described Allen as a 'prophet' who 'has done more than any other person to put modern art on the map of understanding here.'⁹¹ It is not unreasonable to suggest that these educational endeavours helped lay the groundwork for the seminal debates between modernists and conservatives in the years that followed. Indeed, in the midst of these controversies, sparked by the establishment of the reactionary Australian Academy of Art in 1937 and the 1939 *Herald* exhibition of contemporary European painting, art critic Basil Burdett recalled that Allen 'exercised a profound influence in favour of the new forms...and did a great deal to make modern art more generally understood by both artists and laymen.'⁹²

Negotiating the Cultural Cringe: Melbourne 1950

Returning to the United States in 1936, Allen maintained her post at Miss Hewitt's school, gave private tuition, and travelled in the summers to France, England and Mexico.⁹³ Because of her financial difficulties, and the limits on travel during the war, it was not until 1950 that she was able to make a second visit to Australia. By this time, Allen's artistic tastes had again transformed. A friend and student of the abstract expressionist Hans Hofmann, 'the father of 'Action' painting in the United States',⁹⁴ Allen was a regular visitor to Provincetown, the artists' colony in Massachusetts where Hofmann attracted a circle of talented young acolytes. In 1949 these artists hosted Forum 49, a groundbreaking series of discussions and lectures on abstract art, accompanied by an exhibition of huge expressive canvases by Jackson Pollock, Robert Motherwell and Adolph Gottlieb. Allen wholeheartedly embraced this new avant-garde and began to introduce abstraction into her own work. She did not, however, make the accompanying leap into highly emotionalised expressivity, and continued to pursue to the formalist agenda she had articulated in the late 1920s.

⁸⁷ Ambrus, 1992, p. 130; *The Age*, 1935a, p. 24.

⁸⁸ Eagle and Minchin, 1981, pp. 92-93.

⁸⁹ *The Home*, 1936, p. 8; UMA, Frances Derham Papers, 'Personal Notes on Mary Cecil Allen', pp. 15-16.

⁹⁰ *The Argus*, 1936, p. 13.

⁹¹ *The Herald*, 1936, p. 6.

⁹² Burdett, 1938a, p. 17.

⁹³ UMA, Frances Derham Papers, 'Biography of Mary Cecil Allen', pp. 40-42.

⁹⁴ Allen, 1962, p. 4.

Six months later, Allen exchanged this avant-garde atmosphere for the more sober environs of post-war Melbourne, arriving on 12 January 1950. Yet, although 1950s Melbourne is often parodied as a conservative and puritanical backwater, even here the modern was in the ascendancy. The age of post-war prosperity had begun, as had migration from Europe, a housing boom and the accompanying suburbanisation.⁹⁵ The 'Australian way of life' no longer conjured up symbols of the bush, but was now epitomised by the new suburban house, accompanied by a car and sleek consumer goods.⁹⁶ Modern design and architecture were increasingly fashionable, while in 1949 Melbourne was successful in its bid to host the 1956 Olympics, precipitating a process of rapid modernisation.⁹⁷ The smugness and complacency of interwar Australia was receding, and the United States had begun to supplant Britain as a source of military protection and cultural guidance. A leader in the post-war global order, America was also the epicentre of modern technology and culture, and American advertising, cinema and consumer products promised a seductive modern world of luxury and glamour. However, by turning outwards to embrace the modern world, Australians were also made more conscious of their isolation, and the gendered phraseology surrounding modernism in the interwar era was replaced with the concepts of provincialism and imitation.⁹⁸ Meanwhile, the interwar ambivalence towards America persisted, and many remained wary of its aggressive commercialism and homogenising influence.⁹⁹

This embrace of the modern, however, did not yet extend to modern art. Indeed, in 1950 the Melbourne art world was in a state of considerable depression. The 1940s had been a period of great artistic activity, since mythologised as the formative years of Australian modernism. Encouraged by the modernist art patrons John and Sunday Reed, Sidney Nolan, Albert Tucker, John Perceval and Arthur Boyd displaced the 'feminine' modernists of the interwar era, creating a dark and uncompromising vision of Australia, based upon the 'masculine' imagery of death, urban depravity, the harsh outback landscape and the outlaw Ned Kelly.¹⁰⁰ This circle, centred around Heide, the Reeds' home in outer Melbourne, also established the Contemporary Art Society (CAS) and the infamous journal *Angry Penguins*. By 1950, however, these intense energies had dissipated. There was a great exodus of talent overseas, the CAS virtually disbanded and few galleries displayed contemporary art.¹⁰¹ Furthermore, whilst not subject to the vitriol encountered in the interwar years, modernists were still struggling for mainstream acceptance.¹⁰² The NGV, now directed by Daryl Lindsay, remained fundamentally conservative,¹⁰³ and the Heide circle was a select, almost hermetic, coterie, ill-suited to rendering modernism accessible to a broader public.¹⁰⁴ Thus, in 1948 the artist Norman Macgeorge observed that the principles of modern art 'have been as yet little understood by the general public,' whilst Adrian

⁹⁵ Davison, 2006, p. 57; Freestone, 2006, p. 170.

⁹⁶ Dingle and O'Hanlon, 1997, p. 33; White, 1993, p. 20; O'Callaghan, 1993, p. 159.

⁹⁷ O'Callaghan, 2008, pp. 158-65; Bogle, 1998, pp. 71-72, 133-34; Davison, 1997, pp. 67-69.

⁹⁸ Bridgeman, 2006, pp. 292-96.

⁹⁹ White, 1981, p. 162; Docker, 2000, p. 285; Waterhouse, 1995, p. 189; Darian-Smith, 1990, pp. 203-28; White, 1983, pp. 118-19.

¹⁰⁰ Heathcote, 1995, p. 3; Burke, 2005, pp. 135-265.

¹⁰¹ Galbally, 2005, p. 37; Haese, 1981, pp. 269-86; Heathcote, 1995, p. 5; Blackman, 1996, pp. 293-95.

¹⁰² Plant, 1996, p. 14; White, 1993, p. 20.

¹⁰³ Cox, 1980, pp. 200-23; Heathcote, 1995, pp. 39-46.

¹⁰⁴ Heathcote, 1995, p. 6.

Lawlor more bluntly described the situation as ‘artists versus I-know-what-I-likers.’¹⁰⁵

Arriving in the midst of this depression, Allen attempted to bridge the gap between artistic modernism and popular modernity. She was eminently suited to the task – a recognised authority on all things modern, yet also a figure of unthreatening respectability. Although now in her fifties, Allen had maintained her aura of cosmopolitan glamour, scandalising her sisters by wearing pants and colourful ethnic jewellery.¹⁰⁶ She was featured in the *Georges Gazette*, the magazine of Melbourne’s fashionable department store, described as a ‘vivacious painter and gay esthete.’¹⁰⁷ Yet, at the same time, Allen resided with her sisters in Toorak, the epicentre of Melbourne wealth and privilege, and socialised with local influential families, including the Derhams and the Brookes.¹⁰⁸ Daryl Lindsay found Allen ‘a gay enchanting person to take out to dinner,’¹⁰⁹ and she mixed with the George Bell circle of modernists, who, once scandalous, had become art world powerbrokers.¹¹⁰

From this position of influence, Allen attempted to cultivate the appreciation for modernist abstraction that was already widespread in New York. For her, abstraction, like earlier manifestations of modernism, represented a personal response to modern life. Thus, although the artworks she discussed represented a radical departure from those featured in 1936, her message remained fundamentally unchanged. Once again, Allen attempted to show that modern art was not the realm of bohemians, radicals or the psychologically disturbed, but the aesthetic of modernity. In the popular press she demystified Jackson Pollock’s paint-pouring technique, emphasising that, although ‘very modern’, he still appealed to mainstream America.¹¹¹ Although at the time abstraction was often understood as a language of interiority and emotional expressivity, Allen emphasised its formal qualities, linking abstraction to the everyday world of design. She reported that the work of modern artists was being reproduced on handkerchiefs and scarves in New York, and gave a talk to the National Gallery Society discussing the use of colourful modern designs on French tapestries.¹¹² Her March exhibition, held at Georges department store, also juxtaposed modernism with modern commodities, exposing art to shoppers who perhaps would not normally enter a gallery. Allen was quick to exploit this educational potential, giving daily lunchtime talks for the duration of the exhibition.¹¹³

These attempts to champion modernist abstraction were reasonably successful, indicating Allen’s authority as an art educator and the increasing receptivity towards modernism in Melbourne. Her March lecture on abstract sculptor Henry Moore filled the Public Lecture Theatre at the University of Melbourne to capacity, and Sir Joseph Burke, Professor of Fine Arts, later described it as ‘the best explanatory lecture on a modern artist I have ever heard.’¹¹⁴ Allen’s exhibition was also largely well reviewed.

¹⁰⁵ Macgeorge, 1948, p. 11; Lawlor, 1947, pp. 15-16.

¹⁰⁶ UMA, Frances Derham Papers, ‘Biography of Mary Cecil Allen’, p. 49.

¹⁰⁷ *Georges Gazette*, 1950, p. 3.

¹⁰⁸ St John Moore, 1992, pp. 29-30.

¹⁰⁹ UMA, Frances Derham Papers, ‘Personal Notes on Mary Cecil Allen’, p. 17.

¹¹⁰ Cook, 1950, pp. 39-41; Heathcote, 1995, pp. 15-16.

¹¹¹ *The Herald*, 1950, p. 19.

¹¹² *The Sun*, 1950a, p. 17; *The Age*, 1950b, p. 7.

¹¹³ *The Age*, 1950c, p. 2.

¹¹⁴ UMA, Frances Derham Papers, ‘Personal Notes on Mary Cecil Allen’, p. 21.

George Bell in the *Sun* described Allen as a 'dynamic artist', who brought a much needed breath of fresh air into the 'stuffy rooms and studios' of Melbourne.¹¹⁵ Laurence Thomas at the *Herald* employed a similar metaphor, writing 'the imagination at work here is fresh and airy, as though windows were open on all sides of the mind.'¹¹⁶ Most of the paintings sold, and *Sea, studio: winter* (1949) (Fig. 2), a colourful semi-abstract of Allen's Provincetown studio, was even purchased by the NGV. However, hostility remained in some quarters. For instance, after Allen delivered a speech at a private dinner, the French Consul rose 'purple with anger' and declared, 'The 'School of Paris', so called is NOT French Art. French Art is sane, beautiful – it is not this nonsense called Contemporary.'¹¹⁷

Although Allen encouraged a greater appreciation of modernism, it was international modernism she championed, not home-grown products. This focus on the international was clearly a product of Allen's greater familiarity with European and American modernism, but also reflected what had become known as the 'cultural cringe'. As Arthur Phillips wrote in 1950, 'above our writers – and other artists – looms the intimidating mass of Anglo-Saxon culture. Such a situation almost inevitably produces the characteristic Australian Cultural Cringe.'¹¹⁸ With Allen situating modern art within the glamorous sphere of American modernity, the work of local modernists could appear mundane and parochial. Yet, as mentioned, artists such as Nolan and Tucker had pioneered great innovations in Australian modernism during the previous decade.¹¹⁹ Allen's attitude towards these developments is unclear. As far as we know she did not mix with the Heide artists, instead associating with the older George Bell circle, a rival modernist faction. However, given that she socialised with Danila Vassilieff, a Russian artist close to the Reeds, it is likely that Allen and these younger modernists were aware of each other.¹²⁰

Whilst herself embodying the cultural cringe, Allen also warned of the dangers of remaining beholden to its influence. Speaking to the Australian-American Life Association on 21 February, Allen cautioned that the unthinking adulation of American modernity could condemn Australia to remain a second-rate, derivative culture. By blindly following international trends, Australian culture would never be respected, and talented Australians would continue to abandon their homeland for greener pastures. The general view in America, Allen informed her audience, was 'Don't imitate us. Surprise us.'¹²¹ These anxieties were echoed by cultural commentators such as Clive Turnbull and W. E. H. Stanner, who also expressed concerns about the derivativeness of Australian culture.¹²²

Despite these dire proclamations, Allen believed that the dangers of the cultural cringe could be circumnavigated. She urged local artists to eschew reliance on

¹¹⁵ Bell, 1950, p. 18.

¹¹⁶ Thomas, 1950, p. 14.

¹¹⁷ UMA, Frances Derham Papers, 'Biography of Mary Cecil Allen', p. 36. Allen's failure to achieve complete acceptance in Melbourne was perhaps also reflected when, in 1953, her apparently strong application to become Head of the NGV Art School was unsuccessful. See UMA, Frances Derham Papers, Mary Cecil Allen to Frances Derham, Provincetown, 30 July 1953.

¹¹⁸ Phillips, 2006, p. 624.

¹¹⁹ Burke, 2005, pp. 212-65.

¹²⁰ UMA, Frances Derham Papers, 'Biography of Mary Cecil Allen', p. 49.

¹²¹ *The Sun*, 1950b, p. 2.

¹²² Turnbull, 1948, p. 6; Stanner, 1953, p. 8.



Fig. 2. Mary Cecil Allen, *Sea, studio: Winter*, 1949. Oil on canvas, 76 x 55.5 cm. National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne.

international art journals, and instead draw inspiration from the local landscape. In particular, Allen called for a primitivist renewal of Australian aesthetics, identifying potential for the development of a local modernist tradition in the intense colours and textures of the ancient desert interior. After a visit to Central Australia, she wrote an article suggesting that the distinctive landscape could not be comprehended using European aesthetics, and argued that 'Central Australia is a hieroglyph which Australian painters have still to read ... One feels that a new and distinctive Australian art could be evolved from its elements.'¹²³ Accordingly, Allen called for a government scheme to fund artists to study the flora and fauna of the Central Australian deserts.¹²⁴

Allen's faith in the restorative potential of the unsullied interior bears parallels to the indigenous modernism championed during this period by Margaret Preston. Both Preston and Allen sought the development of an 'authentic' local modernism based upon the distinctive characteristics of the Australian landscape, giving little credence to the predominately urban experience of most twentieth-century Australians. Furthermore, Preston advocated the incorporation of indigenous visual techniques within local modernist landscapes, a possibility also implied by Allen when she stressed the limits of European ways of seeing, arguing that 'a new kind of space-design is necessary.'¹²⁵ This allusion to non-Western aesthetics echoes the primitivism Allen espoused in the late 1920s, when she urged modernists to cultivate the naïve, instinctively modern vision of children and 'primitive races'. Such parallels, however, appear not have been recognised by the two contemporaries, and Allen's long-term interest in primitive art diminishes the likelihood that she drew direct inspiration from Preston's ideas.

Engaging with the American Modern: Melbourne 1959-60

During the 1950s, Allen lived permanently in Provincetown, which she described as 'the Mecca and market place for the new abstract expressionist and action painter.'¹²⁶ On her final visit to Australia between November 1959 and April 1960, she did much to educate the local public about these abstract techniques. Although now in her late sixties, Allen embarked upon an ambitious schedule of lectures, workshops and painting, as well as an exhibition of her latest work. During this visit Allen would find a more receptive audience than she had encountered in 1935 or 1950, for, as she observed, 'Australia has changed and progressed more in the past nine years than in the previous twenty.'¹²⁷ Whereas in the 1930s modernity in Australia was an exotic, urban and largely elite phenomenon, by 1960 modern life had become an everyday reality, a suburban existence symbolised by Holden motorcars, televisions, modern furnishings and refrigerators.¹²⁸ Immigration, the expansion in tertiary education and increased international travel all encouraged exposure to a broader spectrum of ideas

¹²³ Allen, 1950, p. 192.

¹²⁴ Stuart, 1950, p. 4.

¹²⁵ Allen, 1950, p. 192. For a more detailed discussion of Preston's enthusiasm for Aboriginal visual techniques, see Preston, 2006, pp. 155-60; Miller, 2008, p. 33.

¹²⁶ UMA, Frances Derham Papers, Mary Cecil Allen to Frances Derham, Provincetown, 11 September 1959.

¹²⁷ Fleetwood, 1960, p. 28.

¹²⁸ Lees and Senyard, 1987, pp. 17-27; Rickard, 1988, pp. 228-29; White, 1981, pp. 158-65.

and more cosmopolitan lifestyles.¹²⁹ The 1956 Olympics showcased the growing sophistication of Melbourne, and afterwards a wave of confidence and optimism spread throughout the city.¹³⁰ In the arts too, the modern had acquired a new credibility. After the creative slump of the late 1940s, the artistic community had been reinvigorated, encouraged by European immigrants such as Georges and Mirka Mora. Mirka's studio at 9 Collins Street became the epicentre of the Melbourne avant-garde and the site of the inaugural meeting of the re-formed CAS in 1953.¹³¹ Modernist architecture thrived, encouraged by the post-war housing boom and large-scale building projects associated with the Olympics.¹³² In 1956 Eric Westbrook was appointed the new director of the NGV, and began acquiring contemporary art and hosting contemporary survey exhibitions.¹³³ In the same year, the CAS established the Gallery of Contemporary Art in Flinders Lane, while new commercial galleries began to proliferate.¹³⁴ As a result, when Chris Wallace-Crabbe surveyed the state of Australian art in 1960, he was able to conclude, 'there seems to be much greater confidence and real sophistication than was apparent a decade ago.'¹³⁵

Yet, while contemporaneous, the development of modernism and modernity were not always mutually reinforcing. Although many Melburnians now lived an exemplary modern lifestyle, popular artistic taste continued to favour the picturesque Australian landscapes epitomised by Albert Namatjira.¹³⁶ As a consequence, sources of modernist patronage were limited and the contemporary art market was decidedly anorexic.¹³⁷ In 1959 Joseph Burke averred that there was 'a gulf between the artist and his social environment,' and 'a forbidding background of public indifference and neglect.'¹³⁸ Thus, despite its acceptance within the art world, modern art would never thrive in Melbourne until it was appreciated amongst a broader public.

Clearly, there was considerable scope in this context for Allen to exercise her talents as a populariser of modernism. Each January the NGV and the Council for Adult Education organised a summer school of art instruction intended to 'increase public understanding and appreciation of art.'¹³⁹ In 1960 Allen was the star attraction, described in the *Herald* as 'one of the most vivid and eloquent personalities ever to grace an Australian lecture platform.'¹⁴⁰ The school attracted over a hundred students, including nuns, housewives, school teachers, high school pupils and businessmen.¹⁴¹ Allen's two public lectures attracted an even greater audience that, as in previous

¹²⁹ MacKenzie, 1961, p. 155; Shore, 1953, p. 149.

¹³⁰ Plant, 1996, pp. 9-10, 19; Davison, 1997, pp. 65-76.

¹³¹ Blackman, 1996, pp. 293-95.

¹³² Day, 1995, pp. 4-10.

¹³³ Brack, 1959, pp. 16-17; Blackman, 1996, pp. 303-04.

¹³⁴ Blackman, 1996, pp. 302-04; Mora, 1958, p. 2.

¹³⁵ Wallace-Crabbe, 1960, p. 19.

¹³⁶ Plant, 1996, p. 14; Smith, 1998, p. 247; White, 1993, p. 20. For many years the work of Albert Namatjira was dismissed by critics as kitsch and sentimental, and his mainstream popularity was seen to demonstrate the paucity of Australian artistic taste. More recently, however, he has undergone a critical re-evaluation, and several art historians have stressed his unique contribution to Australian art. See, for instance, Kleinert, 1992, pp. 217-48.

¹³⁷ Patrick, 1960, p. 7; Shore, 1953, p. 151.

¹³⁸ Burke, 2006, p. 642.

¹³⁹ The Sun, 1960a, p. 7.

¹⁴⁰ McCulloch, 1959, p. 25.

¹⁴¹ The Sun, 1960b, p. 27.

visits, attracted audiences in excess of capacity.¹⁴² Armed with hundreds of colour slides, Allen described the rationale behind abstract expressionism and showed examples of recent work by Hofmann, Pollock, Willem de Kooning, Franz Kline, Adolph Gottlieb, Robert Motherwell and Jack Tworikov. Tailoring her discussion towards a lay audience, she likened abstract expressionism to the abstract beauty of nature, comparing works by Pollock to slides of the forest floor, and 'flotsam and jetsam' on the beach. As a result, according to Frances Derham, the audience was able 'to see the beauty in painting they had thought was just a mess.'¹⁴³

Allen also helped to train the next generation of art educators, giving a workshop series for the Art Teachers' Association of Victoria. One participant, Marion Scott, later remembered Allen as 'an inspiring lecturer and unique art-teacher', and praised her 'breadth of vision', which was 'so refreshing and so free from pretence.'¹⁴⁴ Allen was equally enthusiastic about the success of the workshop, writing 'in meeting those young and vital teachers...I was able to see the forces that are shaping so much of the art of Australia both present and future!'¹⁴⁵ Allen's exhibition, held at Australian Galleries in Collingwood, was also a marked success. The exhibition opening on 15 March 1960 was attended by over two hundred people, and all but one of the watercolours sold, a rare achievement in the flaccid modernist art market.¹⁴⁶ Whilst her work received a positive critical reception, Alan McCulloch also praised the exhibition for its accessibility, observing, 'her art is a shorthand, an elegant shorthand and one that anyone can read.'¹⁴⁷ Thus, Allen demonstrated that it was possible to produce art which was popularly comprehensible and commercially viable, without sacrificing a commitment to modernist principles.

Allen's discussion of 'action painting' came at a time when abstraction was a hotly contentious issue among Melbourne modernists. During the 1950s antagonism mounted between abstract and figurative artists, and in 1959 the Melbourne figurative painters John Brack, Arthur Boyd, Robert Dickerson, Charles Blackman, David Boyd, Clifton Pugh and John Perceval, along with art historian Bernard Smith, joined together to form the Antipodeans, aiming 'to champion...the place of the image in art' and defend the traditions of Australian painting against the 'tyranny' of American abstraction.¹⁴⁸ Arriving in the aftermath of this infamous controversy, Allen attempted to enhance understandings of abstraction among local artists. Although Robert Hughes has argued that Melburnians were ill-informed about abstract expressionism prior to the 1967 exhibition 'Two Decades of American Painting',¹⁴⁹ in 1960 Allen provided a first-hand discussion of key American abstractionists, accompanied by colour slides of works 'seldom reproduced or seen elsewhere'.¹⁵⁰ These discussions managed to win the sympathies of even hardened anti-abstractionists. Smith was extremely impressed, and two years later, in his seminal work *Australian Painting*

¹⁴² UMA, Frances Derham Papers, 'Biography of Mary Cecil Allen', pp. 67-68.

¹⁴³ UMA, Frances Derham Papers, 'Biography of Mary Cecil Allen', p. 69.

¹⁴⁴ Scott, 1964, n. p.

¹⁴⁵ UMA, Frances Derham Papers, 'Biography of Mary Cecil Allen', pp. 66-67.

¹⁴⁶ Derham, 1979, p. 47.

¹⁴⁷ McCulloch, 1960, p. 30.

¹⁴⁸ Smith, 1959, pp. 5-6; North Brighton, 1959.

¹⁴⁹ Hughes, 1970, 259-61.

¹⁵⁰ UMA, Frances Derham Papers, Letter from Mary Cecil Allen to Frances Derham, Provincetown, 7 August 1959.

1788-1960, commended Allen's role in helping 'to make the American contribution to post-war painting better known.'¹⁵¹

Allen did not, however, attempt to convert her audience to the doctrine of abstraction. Instead, as always, she emphasised 'the individuality of the artist and his right to express what he thinks and feels in his own way.'¹⁵² Indeed, her own art encompassed both abstract and figurative elements, demonstrating that the two need not be diametrically opposed.¹⁵³ For instance, her Melbourne exhibition, entitled 'Men in Action', combined the spontaneous energy and expressive style of abstract expressionism with literal depictions of men in action, such as fishermen and road workers, suggesting that 'action' could simultaneously become the style and the subject of painting.¹⁵⁴ Furthermore, Allen was an enthusiastic fan of local abstractionist Roger Kemp, but also visited the studio of the antipodean Charles Blackman, and expressed pleasure when he was awarded the Helena Rubenstein Travelling Scholarship in 1961.¹⁵⁵

As the pejorative association between abstraction and America suggests, the appropriation of the American modern was a sensitive issue in the 1950s. Sentimental links to Britain endured, but via Hollywood, television, music, consumer products and advertising, American culture was becoming increasingly ubiquitous in Australia.¹⁵⁶ For many, particularly among the young and the aspirational middle-class, America was a culture to emulate, and represented all that was glamorous, innovative and exciting.¹⁵⁷ This cultural shift occurred in parallel with a growing political allegiance to the United States, formalised by the signing of the ANZUS Treaty in 1951. However, as the process of Americanisation accelerated, so did ambivalence towards America, and others, even pro-modernists, saw the United States as a vulgar force of cultural imperialism.¹⁵⁸ For instance, in his 1960 polemic, *The Australian Ugliness*, Robin Boyd described contemporary Australia as 'Austerica', a 'second-hand America' dominated by tawdry and outdated imitations of American styles.¹⁵⁹

Allen, a long-time resident of the United States, was inevitably implicated in these debates. Although still an Australian citizen, in 1960 she observed 'I have become quite American',¹⁶⁰ and, like the abstract expressionists she admired, Allen and her art were seen to embody the dynamism of post-war America. Local critics opined that 'the speed of life in America is in her paintings,' and believed that her exhibition revealed 'an artistic personality full of vigor, color and life.'¹⁶¹ Allen herself was described as 'vital, vivacious – effervescent almost...a woman who obviously lives

¹⁵¹ UMA, Frances Derham Papers, 'Biography of Mary Cecil Allen', pp. 68-69; Smith, 1962, p. 310.

¹⁵² SLV, Mary Cecil Allen: Australian Art and Artists file, Invitation to the opening of Mary Cecil Allen exhibition at Australian Galleries, 1960.

¹⁵³ UMA, Frances Derham Papers, 'Biography of Mary Cecil Allen', pp. 66-67.

¹⁵⁴ UMA, Frances Derham Papers, 'Biography of Mary Cecil Allen', p. 67; Shore, 1960, p. 2.

¹⁵⁵ UMA, Frances Derham Papers, 'Biography of Mary Cecil Allen', pp. 80-81.

¹⁵⁶ Bell and Bell, 1993, 158-83; Rickard, 1988, pp. 207-08; Docker, 2000, pp. 271-73; Lees and Senyard, 1987, pp. 1-5; Plant, 1996, pp. 9-10; Bell and Bell, 1998, p. 4.

¹⁵⁷ Boyd, 1960, pp. 82, 89; White, 1983, pp. 118-19; Davison, 1998, p. 176.

¹⁵⁸ Bell and Bell, 1993, p. 167; Waterhouse, 1995, p. 230; Davison, 1998, p. 160.

¹⁵⁹ Boyd, 1960, pp. 15, 71-88.

¹⁶⁰ The Sun, 1960a, p. 7; The Age, 1959, p. 10.

¹⁶¹ McCulloch, 1960, p. 30; Warren, 1960, p. 18.

life at a fast pace.¹⁶² Yet, while associated with the energy of America, Allen lacked the accompanying taint of vulgar commercialism. She was invited to speak at organisations associated with the upper echelons of Melbourne society, whilst her exhibition was opened by Lady Casey, and attended by notables including the Ambassador for Thailand, Lady Grimwade, Lady Lindsay and NGV director Eric Westbrook.¹⁶³ Thus, with such impeccable social connections, Allen brought refinement to the vitality of American modernity.

Finally, Allen attempted to mediate the apparently unequal relationship between Australia and America. Herself an example of the success Australians could achieve in the United States, Allen asserted, 'Americans DO know about Australians. They're all most interested and look upon you all as brothers.'¹⁶⁴ She also soothed anxieties about the desirability of life in Australia, declaring 'I love Melbourne...I call it the world's garden city.'¹⁶⁵ Similarly, Shore cited her recent studies of rural Victoria as proof that Allen 'has lost nothing of her love for Australia.'¹⁶⁶ By straddling an American and Australian identity in this manner, Allen addressed concerns about American cultural imperialism, reframing this relationship as a reciprocal exchange in which Australia could be an equal partner.

Conclusions

Allen left Melbourne on this final occasion stimulated by local artistic developments, writing in 1961, 'art life in Melbourne is so exciting now in so many ways and it is lovely to think of.'¹⁶⁷ Two years later Allen died suddenly in Provincetown, aged sixty-eight. Following her death many in Melbourne rushed to pay tribute to her career. In the *Age* Shore wrote, 'Australia has lost one of its most brilliant, intelligent artists and art thinkers...How we loved her and she us!', while Allen's friends organised a retrospective exhibition at the Lyceum Club.¹⁶⁸ Also, in 1963 the annual Mary Cecil Allen Memorial Lecture was established to honour her commitment to art education.

While this recognition was clearly deserved, it is intriguing to note that whilst in the United States Allen was well known and respected as an artist, in Australia she was seen primarily as an educator. Indeed, in 1946, Allen's work was rejected from an exhibition of women's art at the Art Gallery of NSW, and the NGV did not purchase one of her paintings until 1950.¹⁶⁹ Even today few of her works can be found in Australia, although this is also due in part to her American residency. This suggests that, amidst the vigorous modernity of New York, there was scope for women to assume the 'masculine' identity of artist. In Australia, meanwhile, Allen had to largely content herself with the nurturing role of teacher, handmaiden to the creative impulses of others.¹⁷⁰

¹⁶² Fleetwood, 1960, p. 28.

¹⁶³ Gillison, 1975, p. 93; Peers, 1993, p. 59; *The Age*, 1960, p. 13.

¹⁶⁴ Fleetwood, 1960, p. 28.

¹⁶⁵ Fleetwood, 1960, p. 28.

¹⁶⁶ Shore, 1960, p. 2.

¹⁶⁷ UMA, Frances Derham Papers, Letter from Mary Cecil Allen to Frances Derham, Provincetown, 27 January 1961.

¹⁶⁸ Shore, 1962, p. 20.

¹⁶⁹ Kerr, 1999, p. 7.

¹⁷⁰ A similar argument has been made by Roe, 1998, p. 152.

Yet, as an educator, Allen was far from a compliant or submissive figure. Instead, in the 1930s she challenged prejudices against modernism within the conservative establishment, while in the post-war era she popularised modern art amongst a wider public. In doing so, she helped bridge the gap between the 'masculine' elitism of modern art and the feminised mass culture of modernity. In addition, by harvesting cultural riches from the United States, Allen became a vehicle of Americanisation. Indeed, the trajectory of her life and career embodies the shifting loyalties of twentieth-century Australia. Born within the Melbourne establishment, she was raised and educated according to English models. Ultimately, though, Allen became a resident of New York, pre-empting the turn towards America by several decades.

This study, however, raises as many questions as it seeks to answer. Long periods of Allen's life remain virtually untouched, and a close examination of her oeuvre is yet to be conducted. Yet, even from this brief examination, it is apparent that Mary Cecil Allen was a remarkable woman whose art and life merit further attention. Artist, traveller, writer and educator, she embraced the vibrancy of the American modern yet retained the trappings of her privileged upbringing, enabling her to challenge the conservatism of Australian culture from within.

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List of Illustrations

Fig. 1. Unknown photographer, *Portrait of Mary Cecil Allen*, c1920s. Sepia toned photograph, 24.2 x 19 cm, Canberra, National Library of Australia, image number: nla.pic-an22452836.

Fig. 2. Mary Cecil Allen, *Sea, studio: Winter*, 1949. Oil on canvas, 76 x 55.5 cm, Melbourne, National Gallery of Victoria, accession number: 2243-4.