

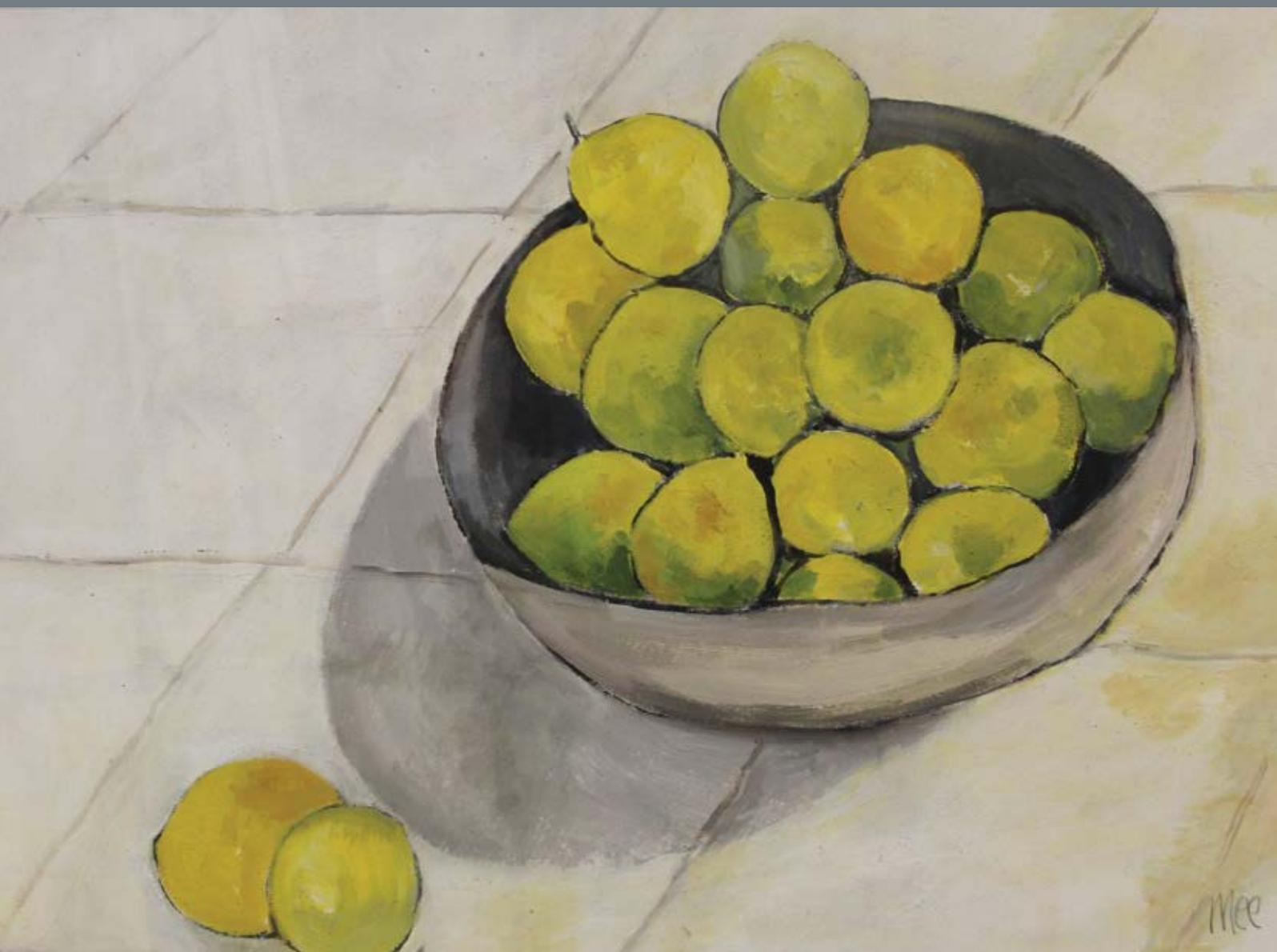
All About Mee

*A retrospective exhibition
of art by Sheelah Mee
(1920 – 2013)*

4 December 2016 – 29 January 2017

Redland Art Gallery, Cleveland

Curated by Louise Martin-Chew and
Dominique Macedo

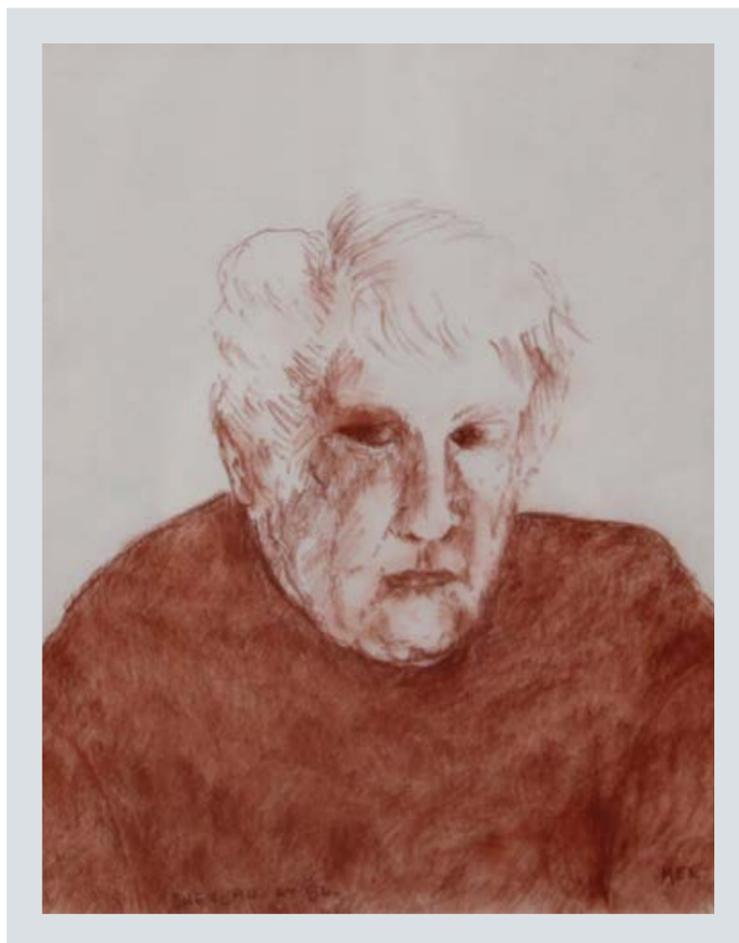


An artist's 'back story' may provide an insight into the source of their creative drive, and some clue as to what tuned their eye, and honed their skills to express a personal vision. In the work of the late Sheelah Mee (1920 – 2013), we are offered a rare insight. She wrote stories, later in her life, which recalled her vivid memories of growing up in England. One of these muses on the red bus that was parked next door behind a neighbour's house to make a shed (an installation at odds with the manicured gardens close by), its increasingly muted colour, and the blue flowers on the abundant creeper that gradually grew over it. This and other stories mirror the visual intensity that Mee developed in her drawings, paintings and prints.

Mee's imagery in this exhibition describes a holistic creative vision, along with a Jane Austen-esque gift for the ridiculous, an often wry social commentary evident in its aesthetic. Almost 100 years after her birth, this acutely perceptive vision remains gently persistent, tugging at the scenes of the personal, local and broader landscapes.

Sheelah Mee lived a long and productive life, having set her course as an artist early. Born in 1920, her family lived in Sussex (United Kingdom). When she was offered a place at art school in London, she left her family, as a teenager, to live there. This was unconventional for a young woman in the 1930s, but the determination characteristic of her life is evident in her self-sufficiency. Her family could not afford to pay the fees for art school, so she worked to support herself, paying for tuition through employment with interior decorator Felix Harboard.

Mee studied with British artists Nora Jeffreys and Arthur Lindsay, and at London-based technical colleges. She learnt by observation in the post World War I cosmopolitan London milieu, seeing work by artists such as Blake and Constable at the Tate Gallery, as well as, Jacob Epstein and Stanley Spencer. Carolyn Dodds, who grew close to Mee later in life, suggested, "In art the new figuration of the time was closely associated with notions of socialism and democracy: this has been a lasting influence on Mee's life and work".¹



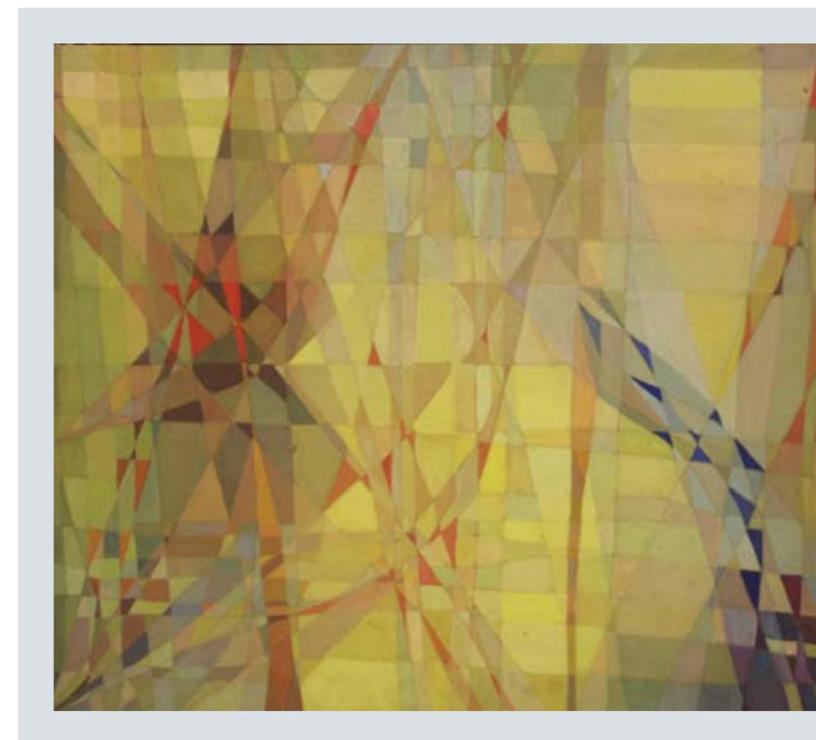
Sheelah Mee, *Self portrait* 2004, pencil on paper. Courtesy of the Mee family.

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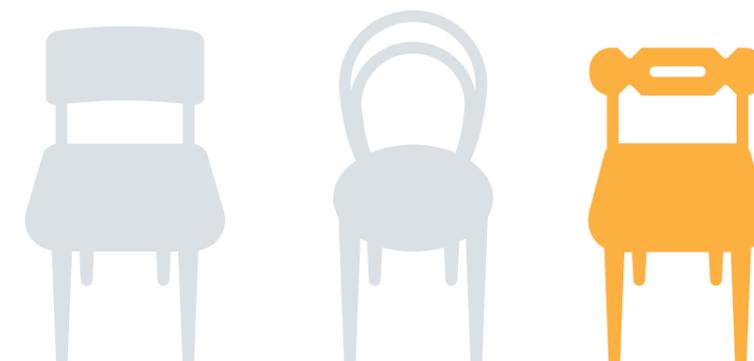
However, World War II changed everything, and Mee was not exempt. In 1939 she joined the Women's Auxiliary Forces. In the course of her service she met Colin Mee, a sergeant in the Air Force Reserves. Mee's daughter Deirdre Gillen recalled, "They met at Biggin Hill Aerodrome, used to marshal air defence during the war. The WAF women would take the plan and inform the pilot when they were likely to run out of fuel. Dad was a radar operator. He used to radio in, saying, 'Mee here ...', and she would tell him not to be smart!"²

In 1942 they married, settling in Sheffield. In 1954, with five young children, and the youngest, twins Sean and Seamus only six months old, they emigrated to Australia. Their sixth child, Gemma, was born after they settled in Brisbane. Family remained Mee's preoccupation for some years. While culture – music, good literature and art – were integral to their childhood, Mee's children were not particularly aware of her artistic interests until all except the youngest, had left home. Sean Mee recalled, "Sometimes she would paint on holidays at Pottsville". As far as her children were concerned, her artistic career began when she was 50 and less encumbered with responsibilities of family life.

The turning point came when Mee saw contemporary paintings by Mervyn Moriarty in Fortitude Valley. Within two years of picking up her brushes again, she was winning prizes and successfully exhibiting. More study followed, and she rapidly became part of the developing milieu around contemporary art in Brisbane. It was a small but dynamic scene – Gallery 111 was founded by Ian Rees and Ray Hughes, Moriarty started the EastAus Art School (1971), which became the Australian Flying Arts School (1972), Mee met European émigré critic Gertrude Langer and artists who emerged at this time, many of whom went on to build their professional lives with Ray Hughes Gallery.



Sheelah Mee, *Wildflower* n.d, synthetic polymer paint on canvas. Courtesy of the Mee family.



Mee began teaching for Moriarty's Australian Flying Arts School in Brisbane's Adelaide Street, and held her first solo exhibition there. She continued to build a solid exhibiting history into the 1980s, and inspired others until the end of her life.

Her relocation to Redland Bay, with Colin (in 1973), saw her involvement with the Redland Yurara Art Society (from 1980). She became, arguably, Yurara's most influential teacher and member during this period. She taught, grew the membership, organised the art prize, and undertook a long stint as President. Artist Lyndal Hargrave said, "Sheelah was always, first and foremost, interested in the art. Her depth of knowledge was immense and she was willing to share it. Sheelah has been one of my most influential mentors and became a good friend."³

Mee's interest in colour, shape, composition and figuration is detailed in this retrospective exhibition, as is the extraordinary breadth of her practice. Her passionate interest was in expression, and her home and immediate environment was her richest source of material. Deirdre Gillen said, "Her houses were always decorated beautifully, and her arrangements artistic. My daughter thought (as a child) that, 'Everyone's grannies houses were like that'. We lived surrounded by art. My parents read magazines and newspapers, and talked! Mee was very stylish – always."

Accordingly, this exhibition has been conceptualised as a 'salon hang' to capture the ambience of Mee's creative environments and her responses to them. Grouped around favourite subjects and media, it illustrates Mee's artistic habit, to visit and revisit objects and themes. The influence of Mervyn Moriarty is made more evident with the recent solo exhibition of his work, *Colour: Mervyn Moriarty* that this year marks the 45th anniversary of the Australian Flying Arts School. Moriarty's lessons about harmonious colour relationships, pictorial balance, and the revelation of the real are echoed in Mee's paintings. As a Flying Arts tutor in the 1970s, her subsequent involvement in the establishment of the Brisbane Institute of Art from 1983, her commitment to the Redland Yurara Art Society, and her involvement in *Sugarloaf Tuesdays* after she moved to Proserpine (2005), Mee also demonstrated Moriarty's ideas concerning the personal artistic enrichment available through teaching others.



Sheelah Mee, *As it was* n.d, synthetic polymer paint on board. Courtesy of the Mee family.

“Her houses were always decorated beautifully, and her arrangements artistic. My daughter thought (as a child) that, ‘Everyone’s grannies houses were like that’. We lived surrounded by art. My parents read magazines and newspapers, and talked! Sheelah was very stylish – always.”

DEIRDRE GILLEN

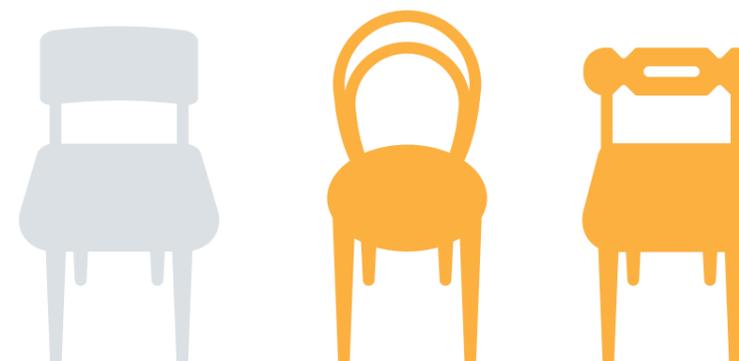
So much of her work was representative of her life, and visual essays into the political issues of the day were rare yet heartfelt. Her only exhibition of sculpture took place in 1992 and in it she protested the moving of the resident Aboriginal population out of South Bank for Brisbane's Expo 88. A sculpture that sits inside a box reveals, when the lid is lifted, a collection of Aboriginal heads with an Aboriginal flag and a land rights sign. Her intention was to highlight the injustice done to these Aboriginal residents, discarded as part of the area's gentrification, like baggage no longer required. This work, which we have been unable to show, reflects the injustices of that period.⁴

What becomes clear when talking to those who knew her is that Mee was a vocal and involved citizen, with politics, social welfare and justice constituent parts of her soul. Various described by her children as, "A volcano, force of nature, and, an experience", art was the place she poured her emotion, passions and repressed creativity, particularly after she turned 50.

In this exhibition what becomes evident is an overarching gentleness, a joy in the expressive power of paint and its ability to channel moods and moments as varied as Mee's days. There is a strong sense of her environment in the tracing of places both inside and out, a Morandi-like crystallisation of still life and its simplicity, and individuality given to the friends and family that were always part of her picture.



Sheelah Mee, *The yellow chair* n.d, synthetic polymer paint on canvas. Courtesy of the Mee family.



The yellow chair which may have come originally from Redland Yurara Art Society Studio was an oft-repeated motif. Mee made numerous self portraits, one dated 2004, that won an award (judged by Betty Churcher), and the moody *Introspection* (1998) which acknowledges how difficult it is to age. The series of *Hidden places* may bridge the gap between figuration and abstraction in her work, and the inclusion of other abstract works describe an extraordinarily well-rounded artistic journey.

She was an able and prolific print-maker, and the reprinting of some of these works by Carolyn Dodds is an extraordinarily collegiate and generous act from a friend and fellow artist, a tribute to the artistry and companionship they shared.

Mee moved to Proserpine in 2005 and continued to be involved in her local art community. An exhibition of the work of her fellow artists became *Sugarloaf Tuesdays*, shown in 2006. When she mounted what she thought would be her final exhibition at Strathdickie Gallery in Proserpine in 2007, *Memories of Mee*, she intimated that having a family had inhibited her creative output. While Deirdre acknowledges the cost that Mee suffered as an artist, "She never stinted as a parent".

Tim Lynch, Program Manager at the Museum of Brisbane, also met Mee late in her life in his role as judge of the Whitsunday Art Prize.⁵ "She was frail then and had entered a small work on paper with loose mark making (all the one colour blue). I gave her a prize – it was an impressionist work, with enough detail to tell a story, and to evoke the tropics, water, and boats. I believe she was at her best with robust composition, and her use of only a couple of 'proud' colours. She deserves the recognition – she was another woman artist not given a fair go."⁶

Sheelah Mee was an unstinting creator whose commentary and gentle aesthetic continues to give pleasure. Her work had many signatures, first SOK, then SMEE, then and finally, simply, MEE. These changes may be seen to have accompanied her many evolutions – what remains at the heart of all of the work in this exhibition is the sense that Mee was wholeheartedly, and overarchingly, an individual whose creative drive sustained her. The darkness and fury inherent in the interior titled, *Do not go gentle into that good night, rage, rage against the dying of the light* (2003), suggest that this passion is destined to outlast her bodily energies.

Louise Martin-Chew
October 2016



Sheelah Mee, *Hidden places 3* 1991, synthetic polymer paint on canvas. Courtesy of the Mee family.

I believe she was at her best with robust composition, and her use of only a couple of 'proud' colours.

TIM LYNCH
PROGRAM MANAGER, MUSEUM OF BRISBANE

End notes

- 1 Carolyn Dodds, catalogue essay for, *In my beginning is my end: A retrospective exhibition of the work of Sheelah Mee*, Redland Art Gallery, 2000.
- 2 All quotes from Deirdre Gillen and Sean Mee from interviews with the author, 2016.
- 3 Lyndal Hargrave, email to Dominique Macedo and the author, 28 January 2016.
- 4 Interestingly, this darkness is also evident in Oodgeroo Noonuccal's writings from the 1980s (in marked contrast to her optimism of the 1970s).
- 5 This was in 2009 or 2010.
- 6 Tim Lynch, email to the author, 29 August 2016.

Images

Back cover image: Sheelah Mee, *Committee meeting* n.d., synthetic polymer paint on canvas. Courtesy of the Mee family. (Image digitised from a slide).

Front cover image: Sheelah Mee, *Lemons*, 2000, synthetic polymer paint. Courtesy of the Mee family.

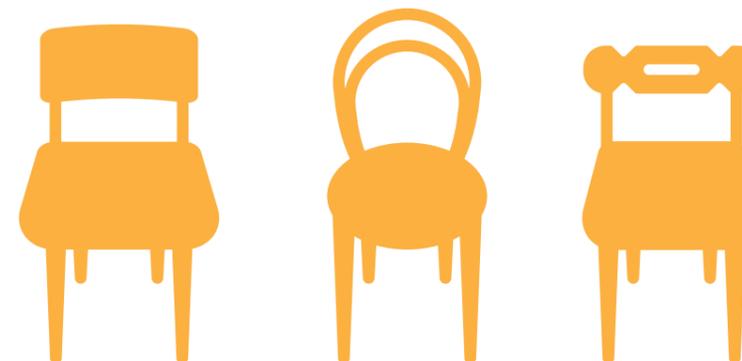
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Sheelah Mee, *Do not go gentle into that good night, rage, rage against the dying of the light* 2003, synthetic polymer paint on canvas. Courtesy of the Mee family.



All About Mee: A retrospective exhibition of art by Sheelah Mee

Redland Art Gallery, Cleveland

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Sunday 9am – 2pm

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*Redland Art Gallery is an initiative of Redland City Council,
dedicated to the late Eddie Santagiuliana*

