



A dialogue in paint:

John Seery's *East* and Jackson Pollock's *Blue Poles*

Sometimes when I begin a painting I have an image of a color that I want to explore. I can be seduced by color. In fact, it is usually this seduction by a specific color that initiates the painting. Once I choose a color, I have to validate my choice. I do this by making the color rationalize itself on the canvas; as soon as that first color touches the canvas the rationalization begins. The initial color seeks to harmonize with the rest of the canvas (to me). It suggests options – flicking through a mental card catalogue of colors and when the right one comes I can feel it and apply it. Its purpose is to jolt the initial color into life. Other colors enrich and solve. Each new color must have its own identity and yet harmonize with each other. Each painting has its own logic and this logic is expressed through harmony...

John Seery 'Artist's Statement' 1975¹

The National Gallery of Australia's spectacular purchase in 1973 of Jackson Pollock's *Blue Poles: Number 11, 1952* for the then extraordinary sum of A\$1,300 000 overshadowed many of the acquisitions made in the early 1970s. In 1976 in an article entitled 'The light in the shadow of *Blue poles*', the curator, critic and artist Elwyn Lynn, surveyed the fledgling collection of international art, which at that time numbered a mere thirty-three paintings and eight sculptures. Lynn sought to draw attention to other major, though seemingly overlooked, acquisitions such as Francis Bacon's *Triptych* 1970, Chuck Close's *Bob* 1970, as well as a large abstract painting by the contemporary American artist John Seery, entitled *East* 1973.²



John Seery, *East* 1973

Collection: National Gallery of Australia Purchased 1974



Jackson Pollock

Blue poles: Number 11, 1952 1952

Collection: National Gallery of Australia Purchased 1973

East was acquired in May 1974, less than a year after the purchase of *Blue poles*. Unlike *Blue poles*, *East*, bought for a meagre four-figure sum, arrived in Australia without fanfare. It was acquired as representative of Lyrical Abstraction, a perceived revival of painterly abstraction amongst an emerging group of American painters during the early 1970s.

Lyrical Abstraction gained currency as a term following an exhibition of the same name held at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York in 1971. In the introductory 'statement' to the exhibition, it was claimed that 'there was a movement away from the geometric, hard-edge, and minimal, toward more lyrical, sensuous, romantic abstractions in colors which were softer and more vibrant. ... The artist's touch is always visible in this type of painting ... Surfaces are never anonymous as in minimal paintings; they are delicately nuanced and often suggestive of cloudy voids.' Though these artists were not seen as 'going back to any previous style' they were recognised as relating to the achievements of Abstract Expressionism and artists such as Robert Motherwell, Mark Rothko, Clyfford Still and Jackson Pollock in particular.³

In the formation of the National Gallery's collection the aim was 'to find key works representing major figures and styles which show the artist or movement at a moment of innovation, change or summation.'⁴ *East*, an impressive painting measuring nearly three metres in height and six metres in width, which still makes it one of the largest

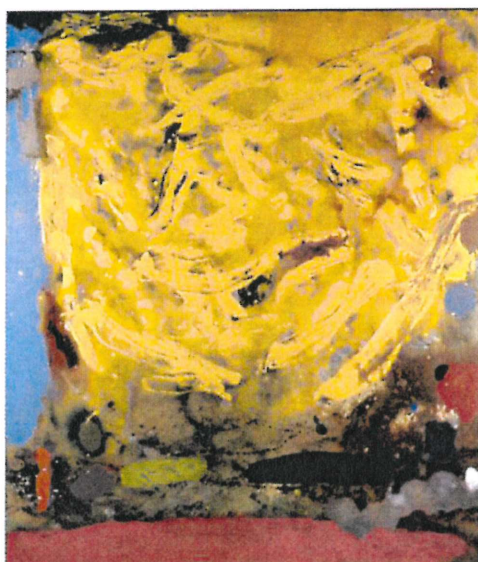
canvases in the collection, is a quintessential or 'summation' work of Lyrical Abstraction. Moreover *East* possessed a distinctive visual feature that made it a particularly timely acquisition for the National Gallery; the black shaft, or 'pole' that 'brings to life the central mass of yellow and works as an axis around which the rest of the elements in the painting revolve.'⁵ This single 'pole' utilised by Seery in *East* seemed to allude to Pollock's *Blue poles*, whereby the art historical relationship between Abstract Expressionism and Lyrical Abstraction was encapsulated through a dialogue in paint.

John Seery was born in Cincinnati, Ohio, in 1941 and studied in the Midwest before moving to New York in 1964, where he met a number of the major figures associated with Abstract Expressionism, such as de Kooning. Seery burst onto the New York art scene in 1970 with his first solo exhibition at the prestigious André Emmerich Gallery. His work at this time was principally executed in muted greys, pale pinks, milky whites and beige, with the 'scallop' shape, his recognised leitmotiv, produced with a stencil and spray gun as in *Raw bone eclipse* 1970 (The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston) or *Jonah* 1970 (Museum of Art, Rhode Island School of Design). *Mingus* 1970 (Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney), acquired in 1972 and the first example of Seery's work to enter an Australian collection, was inspired by the music of legendary jazz figure Charlie Mingus and the atmosphere of the New York bars and clubs frequented by the artist.



John Seery
Raw bone eclipse 1970
Collection: Museum of Fine Arts,
Houston
Gift of Mrs. and Mrs. Jimmy J. Younger

As the artist's work evolved through the 1970s his earlier rather reticent surfaces became subsumed by heavily textured and brightly coloured masses of paint as evident in *Dreams* 1973 (The Madison Art Center, Wisconsin). *Letter to a poet* 1973 (Toledo Art Museum, Ohio), as the title suggests, was the artist's preferred means of corresponding with his friend the writer, poet and critic, Carter Ratcliff. Whilst in *Killarney* 1973 (The Speed Art Museum, Louisville, Kentucky), a smaller and more intimate work, the brooding background is overlaid and for the most part obscured by a vigorously applied symbolic white shroud, expressing the deep sense of loss following the death of his father.



John Seery
Letter to a poet 1973
Collection: The Toledo Museum of Art; Gift of the Toledo Modern
Art Group; Purchased with the aid of funds from the National En-
dowments for the Arts; Photograph: Image Source



John Seery
Killarney 1973
Collection: The Speed Art Museum, Louisville, Kentucky; Gift of
the New Art Collectors

East 1973 was bought by the Acquisitions Committee of the Australian National Gallery from the artist's third solo show at the André Emmerich Gallery in early 1974 and was unanimously praised by critics.⁶ Peter Schjeldahl writing for *Art in America* claimed that Seery's exhibition at Emmerich 'confirmed his pre-eminence' as 'probably the strongest and certainly the most exciting abstract painter of the moment'.⁷

Dominating Seery's recent show was *East*, a ravishing painting 19 feet long and nearly 10 feet high. Its major hue is a blazing golden yellow, with broad swaths of red and green at its bottom and right edges and incidents of white, blue, purple and other colors elsewhere. A thin black diagonal is imbedded in its center – a device recalling Pollock's *Blue poles* and effective here in a similar way.⁸

It must be mentioned that Seery did not set out to emulate Pollock's *Blue poles*. The title *East* suggests poetic allusions to the radiance of daybreak, or perhaps recognition of the influence of Eastern philosophy in the artist's conviction to the 'pure experience' of painting. In hindsight it appears a fortuitous twist of fate that *East* was exhibited soon after the controversial purchase of *Blue poles*, when National Gallery was establishing the cornerstones of what is now the most significant collection of twentieth-century American art in Australia.



Photograph: André Emmerich Gallery, 1974
supplied courtesy of the artist

Photographs of Seery's New York studio reveal the most crucial debt to Pollock in the 'technical dynamics' of working on the studio floor. In *East* the artist poured twenty litres of acrylic, or synthetic polymer, paint onto an unstretched canvas laid on the studio floor. It was then covered with a sheet of plastic approximately ten centimetres above its surface so the paint would not dry out. It was only after five or six days, when the pigments had begun to separate, that the artist commenced work, using brushes, strips of cardboard, sticks and his own hands as tools, dripping, splattering and scraping the paint, 'trusting his intuition' rather than following a pre-conceived plan.



John Seery's studio 1973,
with the painting of *East* in progress
Photograph supplied courtesy of the artist

Intensity is the most important word in talking about Seery's paintings. He works in a dimly lit space, proceeding from feeling to vision; I mean sensory and emotional feeling. ... Of course, he paints with that combination of touch and extraordinary acute sight we call a painter's gesture... Seery doesn't express feeling; he feels in painting, and that is what makes his feeling accessible to vision...⁹

After struggling with the work the artist stapled the 'unfinished' painting to his studio wall and wrote his name in capital letters, "S-E-E-R-Y", across the canvas, 'in an act of frustration', before realising what he accomplished in the work. The now partially obliterated letters, which at first seem like vandalistic graffiti, are expressive gestures in themselves, crucial evidence that captures the intensity of creative process.

Photographs of Seery's New York loft also reflect a 'popular' imagery of the artist's studio, indebted to Hans Namuth's classic photographs of the leading Abstract Expressionists, which were widely propagated in art magazines and exhibition catalogues from the 1950s. The photographs taken of Seery in the 1970s mirror Namuth's earlier depictions of artists such as Pollock and de Kooning, perpetuating the mystique of artist's studio as well as 'documenting' Seery's affinity with the forefathers of Abstract Expressionism.¹⁰



John Seery's studio 1974
Photograph: Susan Weiley supplied courtesy of the artist



John Seery's studio 1974
Photograph: Susan Weiley supplied courtesy of the artist

At the time when *East* was acquired by the National Gallery of Australia, Seery visited Australia, holding a solo exhibition in Sydney, before travelling to Brisbane and north Queensland on a grant from the newly formed Australia Council. Seery continued to live and work in New York throughout the 1970s, exploring a technique of 'drawing with paint' using discarded plastic squeeze bottles as in *The big bang* 1976 (Collection of the artist). In the late 1970s the artist moved to Cape Cod, Massachusetts, where he took up a position as Associate Professor at the Massachusetts College of Art in Boston and as a visiting lecturer at Harvard University in the 1980s. In the 1990s the artist moved to Hawaii where he now lives and works.



John Seery
The big bang 1976
 Collection of the artist
 Photograph: Charles S. Rhyne 1977

In the politically charged art world of late 1970s the painterly 'tradition' to which Lyrical Abstraction subscribed was seen by certain critics as untenable, whereby those artists associated with this short-lived 'movement', Seery included, had to contend with the unfair accusation that their 'painterliness was a retardataire re-hash of the self-indulgence of Abstract Expressionism, but without the angst...'.¹¹ *East*, nevertheless, challenges simple art historical categorisation by protesting the artist's right to creative freedom. In the words of Seery: 'Creation is searching within oneself; that should not be confused by critics, curators, politics'.¹² 'Creation ... is a natural function of the human mind and an integral part of man. It transcends the mundaneness of existence ... it inspires people to live, gives hope and wakes the world from mediocrity. Creation inspires creation.'¹³

East is first and foremost an expression of the artist's passion for colour. It is a painting that lifts the spirit of the viewer. As Peter Schjeldahl wrote after encountering the painting in Seery's solo show in 1974.

The singing, intensely rhythmic expanse of *East* can only be experienced; it can no more be described than it can really be seen, from whatever distance one views it. Its impact is operatic.¹⁴

Steven Tonkin
 Assistant Curator, Research

My sincere thanks go to the many institutions and individuals who have provided me with generous assistance for this article and particularly to John Seery for his personal recollections and insight into his work.

(Endnotes)

¹ see John Seery 'Artist's Statement' in *Image, Color and Form: Recent Paintings by Eleven Americans*, Toledo: The Toledo Museum of Art, 1975, p.24; unless otherwise stated, all comments concerning East are from the artist, in correspondence with the author, NGA file 73/4888

² Elwyn Lynn, 'The light in the shadow of Blue poles', *Architecture Australia*, vol.65 no.2, April / May 1976, pp.64-71

³ Larry Aldrich, 'Statement of the Exhibition' in *Lyrical Abstraction*, New York: Whitney Museum of American Art 1971, np; See also, Carter Ratcliff, 'The New Informalists', *ARTnews*, vol.68 no.10, February 1970, pp.46-50

⁴ Patrick McCaughey, 'The Modern Period', in *Australian National Gallery: An Introduction*, Canberra: Australian National Gallery, 1982, p.47

⁵ John Seery, correspondence with the author, NGA file 73/4888

⁶ Phyllis Derfner, 'New York letter', *Art International*, Volume XVIII no.1, 20 January 1974, p.19; Peter Schjeldahl, 'John Seery at Emmerich', *Art in America*, vol.62 no.2, March-April 1974, pp.107-108, illus. colour p.108; Jane Bell, 'John Seery – André Emmerich', *Arts Magazine*, vol.48 no.7, April 1974, p.71, illus. colour p.77

⁷ Peter Schjeldahl, op cit., p.107

⁸ ibid, p.108

⁹ Carter Ratcliff, 'New York Letter', *Art International*, Volume XVI no.1, 20 January 1972, p.68

¹⁰ The writer Susan Weiley took the photographs of Seery in his studio for a proposed, though never published, book on New York. For a discussion of the artist's studio, see, Chapter 1: The Romance of the Studio and the Abstract Expressionist Sublime, in Caroline A. Jones, *Machine in the studio: constructing the postwar American artist*, The University of Chicago Press, 1996, pp.1-59

¹¹ Elwyn Lynn, 'Thoughts on Seery', *Art International*, Volume XVIII no.9, 15 November 1974, p.48

¹² This is a slightly edited extract from; John Seery, 'Statement', *Studio International*, vol.188 no.968, July / August 1974, p.31

¹³ John Seery, correspondence with the author, NGA file 73/4888

¹⁴ Peter Schjeldahl, op cit., p.108