



# Judith Wright

in conversation with Hannah Hutchison

Movement and the body play an important role in your practice, particularly the movement of bodies in relation to each other. Is this informed by your background as a dancer?

Yes, definitely. My dance experience has been very influential in the formation of my art practice. Movement and space – the intimate spatial connections between two bodies – are crucial, as well as the wider spatial relationships of dancers on a stage. These spaces are negotiated through movement.

You were a dancer with the Australian Ballet Company in the late 1960s. After you left the company, you started to attend life-drawing classes. What was it that attracted you to drawing?

I have been interested in drawing since childhood, making portraits of my school mates and, later, my fellow dancers. I was bemused by the models in my first life-drawing class: one rather large and very curvaceous, the other very tall and thin. Both were different from my then concept of the body beautiful. I soon realised my lack of experience and understanding. Classical ballet requires a certain body type – long-limbed, fine-muscled, slim. Those models were the exact opposite of both that body type and each other. I learnt how wonderful it was to draw such contrasting lines and curves.

Would you say that through drawing you came to see the body in a different way? The imagery in your work resides somewhere between figuration and abstraction.

I think that the space between figuration and abstraction is the most fertile, the most open to interpretation. Figuration can provide a way into a work, while abstraction can allow for a more multifaceted reading.

Significant others marked your return to large-scale paintings on paper following a ten-year period in which you focused on sculptural installations. Why did you decide to make a return to painting?

While the installations were my main focus, I did continue to make works on paper and videos during that time. I tend to go from one to the other as a way of keeping the work fresh, as each requires a different way of thinking or approach. There is also a kind of compulsion to explore.

Can you speak about the materials you used in Significant others?

Japanese paper is my preferred support – it's tough and flexible and more humble than canvas. The scale of the work mimics the span of the extended body. I apply beeswax after the work is finished. The wax provides protection and adds translucency. It is also evocative of skin.

The delicate finish on your work is suggestive of skin and makes for a tactile surface; we almost want to reach out and touch it. Your works on paper really do evoke the idea of human connection through touch.

My aim is to engage the senses of touch and smell, as well as sight. These senses are sometimes more evocative than sight. Again, I can refer this back to my experience in the ballet company, where touch is fundamental to communication.

I am interested in this idea of engaging all the senses in your work. Is that why you also like to use beeswax, as it adds to the sense of smell?

Initially, but the smell fades, like a memory.

Memory also plays a compelling part in your practice.

Memory plays a crucial role in the work. Visual recollection, sound, smell, for instance, are powerful stimulants for memory. Collectively they adhere, holding together the experiences of what it is to be in the world – the joy, the sadness, the vulnerability, the tenderness and the tragedy, all become part of the current fabric of our lives through memory.

Are there any specific memories at play in this work?

While the head forms don't evoke specific memories, they symbolise thoughts and feelings about people close to me; the basic human need for communication and connection with others.

The forms in your works on paper are at once familiar but never certain, flickering on the edge of perception – possibly the profile of a face, perhaps the curve of a shoulder?

It is crucially important that the imagery in the work is completed in the mind of the viewer. While we each have individual life experiences, there is surely a correspondence between maker and viewer. It is in this connection that the real value of the work must reside.

Often the imagery in your works on paper has been inspired by stills from your video works. Is this the case with **Significant others**?

Though I use my significant others – friends, sons, a grandchild – in the making of videos, this particular work does not refer to a specific video work. I'm sure that the way I look through a camera shares something with the way I look at form, but it could equally be the reverse. As a series, this work allows for small shifts and tonal adjustments to occur across the five sheets of paper, which is more difficult to achieve in a single work.

Layers of wax and pigment and the recurrence of abstracted body shapes are present not only in **Significant others** but across your oeuvre. Is accumulation or repetition an important theme in your works?

Yes, I think repetition with some variation allows an openness, a resonance, a richer dialogue between my works.

That's true about the dialogue between your works. Although spanning diverse mediums, they are often linked or connected in some way to form larger bodies of works. What do you think leads you to create in this way?

One work suggests another and requests a different material response. The imagery follows a circular pattern rather than a linear one, in the way that memory loops around unexpectedly, ambushing you from the unconscious.

Although commanding in scale, **Significant others** also has a feeling of quiet intimacy or vulnerability to it. Tell me about the role of contrast in your work.

Yes, contrast has always played an important role in my work. I try to find a balance between extremes – an in-between space – abstraction/figuration, strength/vulnerability, joy/sadness, the impermanency of life/the certainty of death.

Louise Bourgeois' sculpture, **Arched figure** 1993, is displayed near your work in the exhibition. Like Bourgeois, you have created a deeply personal visual vocabulary over your career. How important is autobiographical exploration in your work?

I make work about my own experience of life. That is all I can be certain of. It is all I am qualified to do. I am honoured to have work installed near that of Louise Bourgeois, whose practice I deeply admire.





Judith Wright  
*Significant others* 2016  
(details pp 40, 43)  
acrylic, wax on five sheets  
of Japanese paper