

Emerging Australian and New Zealand Art Histories

AUSTRALIAN WOMEN, ART AND THE INTERWAR YEARS

MIGRATION AND IDENTITY

Victoria Souliman

ROUTLEDGE



“By focusing on the role of women agents who were makers, curators, and critics, this book explores the complex interchange between Australia and Britain in the interwar period. In dialogue with migration studies, these discussions make strange again assertions of how art and national character are entwined by bringing into focus the understudied interventions of women in the art scene and the role of transnational, national and local positionalities in shaping those conversations in exhibitions, art criticism, and patronage.”

Emily Burns, *University of Oklahoma*

“Victoria Souliman’s pioneering study sheds remarkable light on the history and role of ‘national’ collections, the nature and consequences of expatriatism, and the role played by a series of remarkable women in the definition of an Australian school of art. She discusses the issues of provincialism, and of ‘the painful remoteness’ often expressed by Australian women artists, both at home and abroad. Within the context of the decisive impact of Australia’s World War I engagement, which led both to an increasing awareness of an Australian specificity and to a strengthening of the country’s relation to Britain, Souliman’s book considers for the first time the agency of Australian women artists in the shaping up and definition of a national visual idiom between the two World Wars.”

Prof. Frédéric Ogée, *Université Paris Cité*



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Australian Women, Art and the Interwar Years

Australian Women, Art and the Interwar Years: Migration and Identity offers fresh perspectives on the challenges emerging from past nationalistic narratives of Australian art, particularly regarding the ways they have overlooked women's agency in shaping Australian art and identity.

Through a transnational theoretical framework, this book examines the experience of migration of strong-minded Australian women, who were influential cultural agents from the years directly following the end of the First World War until 1941—a pivotal period in the history of cultural relations between Britain and its dominions that has been overlooked in art history. It explores the complexities of cultural ties between Australia and Britain and provides new insights into the interconnectivity between Australian and British modernisms.

This book contributes to contemporary post-colonial debates regarding the cultural survival of the Empire. It innovatively intertwines discussions about national identity, migration, global visual culture, modernism, women, and cultural policy. This book's interdisciplinary approach will attract a diverse range of scholars and researchers in art history and women's migration, particularly focusing on cultural transfers, national identity, and modernism in interwar Australia and Britain. Additionally, this book will appeal to art curators, as it addresses exhibition history and curatorial studies while also exploring themes that have recently gained traction in exhibitions in both Australia and the United Kingdom.

Victoria Souliman is lecturer in French and Francophone Studies at the University of Sydney, Australia. She completed her PhD in Art History at the University of Sydney and Université Paris Cité in 2019. Her doctoral research focused on issues of national identity, expatriatism, and women's agency in the artistic exchanges between Australia and Britain in the early twentieth century. Her other research interests include the representation of female subjectivity and the legacy of surrealism in contemporary visual culture.

Emerging Australian and New Zealand Art Histories

Series editors: Anthony White and Rex Butler

This series highlights the groundbreaking work of emerging scholars who are reshaping the histories of Australian and New Zealand art. It showcases fresh perspectives and innovative approaches, particularly the growing emphasis on global and transnational narratives that connect the art and culture of these regions with the wider world.

Anthony White is an Associate Professor in the School of Culture and Communication at the University of Melbourne. He is the author of *Italian Modern Art in the Age of Fascism* (2020), and *Lucio Fontana: Between Utopia and Kitsch* (2011), and has published in *Grey Room*, *October*, and *Third Text*.

Rex Butler is Professor of Art History in the Faculty of Art Design and Architecture at Monash University. He has written *UnAustralian Art: Ten Essays on Transnational Art History* (2023) with ADS Donaldson and is currently completing a book on Rosalind Krauss.

Books in this series include:

Australian Women, Art and the Interwar Years
Migration and Identity
Victoria Souliman

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Migration and Identity

Victoria Souliman

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Foreword

Emerging Australian and New Zealand Art Histories is a book series initiated by the Art Association of Australia and New Zealand with the support of Taylor & Francis. It highlights the new histories being written about Australian and New Zealand art by emerging scholars from the region, revealing a new generation of art writers who emphasise global perspectives and seek to put the Asia Pacific region in connection with other regions from around the world. Australian and New Zealand authors have been among the prime movers in a recent “decentring” of art history, and in many ways Australia and New Zealand—with their complex First Nations and colonial histories—are privileged places from which to think this profound shift.

The series will include books on the history of art from all periods and locations within Australia and New Zealand. Books on a wide range of mediums will be published, from painting and sculpture to the applied arts, photography, film, video, and the new media. Thematically, the series is open to a broad range of topics and research areas, but will focus on issues of particular relevance to the present moment, ranging from feminism to colonialism, First Nations art to artistic activism, as well as on art curation and collecting, design and material culture and the place of art within our new “attention economies.”

The editors aim to publish work on hitherto overlooked artists, particularly women artists; on the new transnational histories connecting Australia and New Zealand to the rest of the world; and on work by Aboriginal, Māori, and Pasifika scholars. Altogether, the series will seek to move away from the nationalist histories that were dominant during the twentieth century, when art historians and art galleries privileged art that appeared distinctively “Australian” and “New Zealand.” In this way, the series aims to become part of the new globalist histories currently being written everywhere, not only in countries that were previously considered “provincial” but also in such “art centres” as Europe and America.

We have selected our first monograph as exemplary of the work we seek to publish. Victoria Souliman’s *Australian Women, Art and the Interwar Years: Migration and Identity* presents a new perspective on issues that have arisen from previous nationalist narratives of Australian art, specifically how they

have denied women's agency in defining Australian art and identity. It examines the interrelationship between art, migration, and identity, drawing on the experience of any number of migrant women in the context of the cultural and artistic exchanges that took place between Australia and Britain during the interwar years, a pivotal moment in the history of cultural relations between Britain and its dominions. This book also contributes to topical post-colonial debates relating to the survival of Empire, which are perhaps more relevant than ever in our divisive and increasingly fractured times. Discussions around national identity, global visual culture, modernism, women, and national cultural policy are integral aspects of this study.

Souliman rightly acknowledges in the "Introduction" to her book that there has already been considerable scholarship on Australian women artists between the two wars. We might just mention two such studies she cites: Mary Eagle's *Australian Modern Painting Between the Wars 1914–1939* (1989) and Helen Topliss' *Modernism and Feminism: Australian Women Artists 1900–1940* (1996). There has also been not inconsiderable scholarship on the Australian artists and cultural figures who went to live and work in Britain. Again, we might just mention two: Stephen Alomes' *When London Calls: The Expatriation of Australian Creative Artists to Britain* (1999) and Simon Pierse's *Australian Art and Artists in London 1950–1965* (2012). However, the powerful gesture that Souliman enacts is to put these elements together and trace their intersection: her book speaks of the Australian women artists—but also art writers and curators—who lived and worked in Britain between the two World Wars. Thus, there is a certain specificity or particularity to her treatment. At the same time, there is also a corresponding expansion. As opposed to any number of other studies that treat individual Australian women expatriates to Britain, Souliman in her "Introduction" and second chapter makes it clear she wants to generalise the phenomenon: to speak of as many as possible of the Australian women artists in Britain as though they all had something in common, and as though what they were doing was something they were conscious of and even passed on to one another.

What is the lesson to be learned from taking seriously the phenomenon of Australian women artists in Britain between the wars? It is that, at a time when Australia was first constructing its national art narratives in some attempt to discover and assert some distinctively "Australian" quality to its art, any number of its women rejected this and left for another place. They saw the commonalities and not the differences between them and other cultures from around the world. Admittedly, it was Britain, which shared the same language and much of the same culture, but it was possibly something more general, perhaps even universal—Souliman at one point speaks of "transnational identity"—that these artists shared with their new homeland. However, these artists did not simply give up their "Australianness" or no longer regarded themselves as "Australian." Rather, they understood themselves as not having to make any such choice. In her third chapter, Souliman looks at the artist and

critic Edith Fry, who in response to the nationalistic *Exhibition of Australian Art* put on by the Royal Academy in 1923, mounted a series of exhibitions entitled *Australian Artists in Europe*, exactly to demonstrate that Australian artists living in Europe counted. In her fourth chapter, she looks at the art dealer and curator Clarice Zander, who in 1933 brought the groundbreaking *Exhibition of British Contemporary Art* back to Australia, precisely in the belief that Australians living here could understand and appreciate modern art.

Of course, in doing so, Souliman disputes what Australian art is and was. To consider these Australian women expatriates as Australian is to contest that separate, isolated, distinctive “Australian” art that was being spoken of at the time. There were not just those Australian men painting landscapes, cattle stations, and retrograde versions of the Heidelberg School, but women in Britain painting bridges, suffragette banners, and sometimes even their own female partners. However, as Souliman makes clear, in a necessary act of art-historical modesty, but also against those who would accuse this of simply being an act of wilful rewriting, this is not merely, in fact not at all, a matter of some present-day “feminist” perspective retrospectively imposed on the past. On the contrary, as Souliman makes clear in her third and fourth chapters on Fry and Zander, Australian women at the time were entirely conscious of the alternative they constituted to the then-dominant narratives of Australian art. Indeed, in the cases of Fry and Zander, they were not only aware of the alternative they represented for any future account of Australian art, but they themselves wanted to write this new and expanded history of Australian art themselves: Fry by putting on a series of exhibitions of her fellow expatriate artists, and Zander by bringing back to Australia such artists as the Hobart-born Derwent Lees, who had been lost to Australian art insofar as they were now claimed by the British.

Souliman’s *Australian Women, Art and the Interwar Years: Migration and Identity* is a challenge not only to past and existing accounts of Australian art but also to past and existing accounts of British art. For, needless to say, British art history has reciprocally overlooked the contributions of innumerable other countries in its own attempts to construct a distinctively “British” art. *Australian Women, Art and the Interwar Years: Migration and Identity* is, among other things, also an important new account of British art, which we could easily imagine being complemented by a series of other studies taking up the women—and men—from many other countries living and working in Britain and making “British” art. In many ways, therefore, this book itself is something like an immigrant making its way into Britain and British art history. And like all good histories, Souliman’s is a history of the present, of how we got to where we are today. Undoubtedly, one of the most important and discussed exhibitions in Britain in 2025 is the Leigh Bowery retrospective, *Leigh Bowery!*, held at the Tate Modern. What other artist, except perhaps for the now declining Damien Hirst, has more profoundly continued that great “British” legacy of Francis Bacon and Lucien Freud? What other artist more

convincingly captured that moment of the 1980s and 1990s when British punk and new wave exerted considerable influence around the world? Well, Bowery was an Australian expatriate, and whether he was an Australian expatriate “woman” artist we will let the readers of this provocative and suggestive volume decide.

Finally, we would like to express our gratitude for the enthusiasm with which Taylor & Francis greeted the idea of a series of books by emerging scholars from Australia and New Zealand. We would particularly like to thank Lucie Bartonek and Nabila Khadija Ansari for their help and guidance throughout the long and sometimes arduous process of bringing a book to publication.

Rex Butler, Monash University, and Anthony White,
The University of Melbourne.

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