

# IKON

## Exhibition Guide

**Sidney Nolan**

**10 June – 3 September 2017**

**Sheela Gowda**

**16 June – 3 September 2017**

**John Stezaker**

**16 June – 3 September 2017**

**Sidney Nolan**

Sidney Nolan (1917–1992) was one of the most important Australian artists of the twentieth century and he lived the last fourteen years of his life on the Welsh-Midlands border. To mark the centenary of his birth, in collaboration with the Sidney Nolan Trust, Ikon brings to light a selection of extraordinary paintings by Nolan from the 1980s.

Sidney Nolan is best known for his paintings depicting the infamous bushranger Ned Kelly and outback landscapes, but the later paintings defy expectation through a seemingly improvised use of spray paint and an emphasis on emotional response. As Jonathan Watkins, Ikon Director, explains,

*Large and stylistically free, they are like spontaneous breathings of colour, artistic conspiracies that conjure up likenesses mainly of people staring wide-eyed out of their pictorial space – European and Aboriginal. Like ghosts wanting to make contact they seem to interrogate us, spectrally, with their gaze.*

The portraits on display in the first room are taken from a series made in 1982 for an exhibition at the Lanyon Gallery, Canberra. You may recognise certain individuals, such as Francis Bacon and fellow Australian artist Brett Whiteley whose likenesses hang alongside portraits of others who also had a strong personal significance for Nolan, including Arthur Rimbaud (*Young Boy Who*

*Was Good at Latin*) and close friend Benjamin Britten (*Season in Hell*).

A later series shown in the central room, from 1986, features Aboriginal subjects. It signals a return to a theme, evident very early on in Nolan's artistic career, of the unresolved relationship between indigenous Australians and European settlers. Then, in the final room, more overtly there are the paintings that take as their subject the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody (1987–1991), set up to investigate the causes of deaths of Aboriginal people while held in Australian jails in response to a growing public concern. These are very vivid paintings, deriving dramatic impact and poignancy from their resemblance on one hand to spray-painted graffiti, with transgression implied, and on the other to Aboriginal cave paintings.

The 1980s was the decade of post-modernism, of appropriation, a revival of figuration and, incidentally a proliferation of graffiti art, but it would be a mistake to cast Nolan simply in some trans-avant-garde light, because he never stopped painting expressionistically and being open to influence. During that decade he was an elderly artist increasingly unconcerned about artistic convention, very candid and more true to himself than ever. He could not have been stronger at the end of his artistic career.

For Ikon, it is pertinent that Nolan moved to the Midlands in 1983, given that the gallery started in 1965 at a time when he was especially influential in this country. Ikon's founder artists, such as Robert Groves and David Prentice, have acknowledged this and certainly it is possible to detect some stylistic correspondence. Nolan's later work demonstrates the complexity of his artistic output – he was much more than the painter of Ned Kelly – and therefore it is very fitting for Ikon to be showing these paintings.

### Find out more

The exhibition at Ikon is accompanied by a publication with texts by Jane Clark and

Ian Henderson, available from Ikon Shop for a discounted price for the duration of the exhibition.

## **Sheela Gowda**

Ikon presents an exhibition of recent and new work by Indian artist Sheela Gowda (b. 1957). Although her installations are expansive in the exhibition space, she avoids the term 'site specific', explaining instead that they "anticipate, counter or are inspired by the space to begin with; the elements could take on other variants in other spaces". The result is a dialogue between what the artist finds in the gallery, and ideas and observations informed by her experience of living in Bangalore. This large city in South India, keen to take its place in a globalised world, especially through its industrial embrace of information technology, thus provides a wider context for an understanding of her work.

As if to counteract visions of a brave new world, Gowda is drawn to the meditative aspect of making by hand and of process, acknowledging local skills and craftsmanship by employing these methods herself. Her work here evokes a subtle symbolism through the poetic treatment of everyday materials.

The installation in the large gothic room is largely made from sheets of flattened metal drums. These are recycled into 'Bandlis', bowls used extensively in the Indian construction industry to carry concrete slurry, sand and other building materials. Each sheet is cut by hand into eight circular parts then pressed in hand-operated machines into shallow bowls. The process itself yields forms that the artist places at the centre of her work.

### **Interview with Sheela Gowda (May 2017)**

**Your work often draws on various social and political themes. Are there any particular cultural moments which have influenced your work?**

I don't choose a particular moment or incident because it is more significant in its topicality but certain disturbing political trends have made me choose radical directions for my work, like the move from painting to other mediums of expression, from obvious figuration to apparent abstraction.

An innocuous moment or image could inspire. The group of lawyers throwing stones at the media for negative reportage in a 2014 newspaper image could be one example. It is humorous even as it points to a social breakdown of roles. It is not so much about what the incident was about but what these groups represent in society. By masking the eyes of these advocates I give them an anonymity that seems unnecessary as well as refer to justice as a blindfolded figure.

**In many of your works certain colours seem to implicitly communicate various cultural associations. The colour red, for instance, in the installation *It Stands Fallen*, is loaded with historical importance. What is your intention here?**

The predominance of red in this work has to be read in relation to the other elements alongside it. The obvious reference could be to the Worker's Unions the world over. To distract from the singularity of such a reading I have introduced other bits of coloured fabric. The work takes the elements of a 'Shamiana' or 'Pandaal'; a tent like structure that is used to host events, a gathering of people beneath it. The cloth that lies on the ground is the cut out centre of such a shelter whose jagged peripheral edges still remain tied and held up by the supporting poles of the tent. Contrary to this rather violent act of separation it reads as a celebratory bunting.

**You often manipulate industrial materials in your work. What is the significance of these materials?**

The installation using coloured drum sheets came out of an incidental encounter. Piles of drum sheets stacked in a small street instantly drew me to this workshop where a

chorus of sounds accompanied the process of cutting, hammering and pressing that produced the 'Bandlis' – a shallow bowl that has held the mortar of most constructions in Bangalore. It is an iconic design that has evolved from a need and a method of use.

When an act is repeated endlessly and when a form is replicated and physically present in multitudes it is visually stunning. This was a starting point for my use of it, an interest in the transformation of things, its process and its meaning in a wider context. I fit my artistic needs into an already existing recycling process but I tweak it into another trajectory.

**Ikon's galleries are filled with works which respond to the space. How do you adapt your installations to suit a gallery which, in this instance, possesses strong architectural features?**

I have kept it in mind in my choice of works. They do not speak the same language but I think they can exist side-by-side, jostling at times but mostly tolerant. My installations usually consist of elements that are important as signifiers within their own context. They occupy architectural spaces much the same way that forms occupy the pictorial space of a canvas. The viewer negotiates both the work and the room simultaneously bringing in their own emphasis as well, which is what excites me about making installations.

## **Find out more**

The exhibition at Ikon is accompanied by a publication, including an essay by writer and academic Anthony Downey, available from Ikon Shop for a discounted price for the duration of the exhibition.

## **John Stezaker**

John Stezaker (b. 1949) is renowned for his smart conceptualism and use of appropriation through collage and was one of a small number of artists ushering post-modernism into Ikon's programme during

the late 1970s. His *Collages* were shown here in 1978 and subsequently in our survey exhibition *As Exciting As We Can Make It: Ikon in the 1980s*.

Stezaker's video *Horse* (2012), now being screened in Ikon's Tower Room, consists of 3600 images of various horses at a side angle, taken from the front page of the same racehorse catalogue over the past 30 years. Near-identical pictures, projected at 23 frames per second, creating a flickering image of a horse which at once brings to mind Eadweard Muybridge's *The Horse in Motion* (1878) and signature works by British equestrian painter, George Stubbs. Muybridge's animation was a seminal moment in the transition of photography to film in the late-nineteenth century, famously revealing that as a horse gallops there is a brief moment of 'flight'. Stezaker's work, on the other hand, is an animation of countless horses striking a static conventional pose, a moving image of a subject going nowhere.

## Associated Events

### **Sheela Gowda in Conversation** **Saturday 17 June, 6–7pm – £3** **Booking essential**

Join artist Sheela Gowda in conversation with Professor Anita Taylor, Bath School of Art and Design. Enjoy a lively discussion on Gowda's current exhibition in the light of her artistic practice overall. The galleries will be open between 5–6pm for visitors to enjoy the exhibition before the talk.

### **Eblana String Trio** **Tuesday 20 June, 7.30pm – 9pm – £12** **Booking essential**

Benjamin Britten was a close friend of Nolan's and is depicted in one of the portraits in Ikon's exhibition. In this concert the Eblana Trio from the Birmingham Conservatoire fill the Nolan gallery space with the performance of Britten's work including *Phantasy Quartet with Oboe* (1932) and *String Quartet no.1 in D major op.25* (1941) and *Elegie for Solo Viola*.

### **Symposium – Sidney Nolan** **Monday 26 June, 6–8pm – FREE** **Booking essential**

Join Dr Ian Henderson, King's College London, for a keynote lecture on the representation of aboriginal figures in Nolan's paintings. This will be followed by a round table discussion, concerned more generally with Nolan's impact on contemporary art, with artists Clare Woods, Kate McMillan, Shaun Gladwell and Tim Maguire, chaired by Jonathan Harris, Birmingham School of Art.

### **Print Masterclass at** **The Sidney Nolan Trust** **The Rodd, Presteigne LD8 2LL** **Saturday 8 July, 11am–5pm – £50** **Includes materials, bring your own lunch** **Booking essential**




This practical artist-led workshop explores the potential of printmaking as a means to reveal the natural beauty of landscape around The Rodd. Using found materials and working outside, the day incorporates a range of experimental processes in mixed media combined with printmaking techniques in the broadest sense capturing the essence of this ancient place that was home to Sidney Nolan in his later years.

## Find out more

Visit the Resource Room where you can find a selection of books, audio and film.

If you have any questions about the exhibition please ask the Information Assistants in the gallery.

## Stay in touch

Subscribe to our e-bulletin at [www.ikon-gallery.org](http://www.ikon-gallery.org) and find us on    [ikongallery](https://www.instagram.com/ikongallery)

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Free entry, donations welcome



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