

Jan Senbergs: observation— imagination

Artwork labels

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The whipper

1961

enamel paint on composition board

Courtesy of the artist and Niagara Galleries, Melbourne

Literature has always been an important source of imagery for Senbergs. This work, one of his earliest, is based upon an episode in *The Trial* (1925) by Czech writer Franz Kafka. In the painting two figures cower beneath 'the whipper', who metes out a brutal punishment to them. This work was included in Senbergs's second solo exhibition at the Argus Gallery, Melbourne, in 1962.

Two heads

1961

enamel paint on composition board

Private collection, Melbourne

'I was always interested in painting buildings and things and I tried to make them half-human, trying to put the figures into them; in the end they blended together as one, the figures and the buildings and the people.'

Jan Senbergs, 1965

The tower

1961

enamel paint on composition board

Courtesy of the artist and Niagara Galleries, Melbourne

The tower/fort image was one of Senberg's earliest, and became a recurring motif over the next two decades.

'There was a painting I did just after my first exhibition ... it was a tower form on a totally black ground. It's a very simple picture, totally quite different to all the pictures [I had done before]. I felt at that time when I did it that it was a kind of breakthrough.'

Jan Senbergs, 1984

Architecture

1963

colour screenprint on paper, edition of 10

Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney

Gift of the artist 2008

281.2008

In 1961 Senbergs came across a magazine featuring photographs of the work of Catalan architect Antoni Gaudí. The fantastical shapes of Gaudí's buildings resonated strongly with the young artist, and the forms in many of Senbergs's early paintings and screenprints were based upon Gaudí's work. In 1984 Senbergs commented: 'I think I've always had an instinctive feeling for architecture ... and therefore I tried to build my images based on that kind of thing ... it was simply a visual thing that stimulated me'.

Guardians

1963

colour screenprint on paper, artist's proof, edition of 10

Courtesy of the artist and Niagara Galleries, Melbourne

Senbergs was not able to attend art school, and instead undertook a four-year commercial screenprinting apprenticeship. During this time he began to make his own screenprints, and in 1960 exhibited several of these alongside his paintings in his first solo exhibition. Around 1963 Senbergs met Tate Adams, Head of the Printmaking department at RMIT University, Melbourne, who invited him to use the facilities there after hours. These early prints were made from stencils cut by hand, and Senbergs created painterly effects by printing colours on top of one another and by varying the pressure of the squeegee.

Head

1963

colour screenprint on paper, artist's proof, edition of 10

Courtesy of the artist and Niagara Galleries, Melbourne

Study for 'A man of few words'

1963

colour screenprint on paper, edition of 15

National Gallery of Australia, Canberra
Gift of the artist, 2012, donated through the
Australian Government's Cultural Gifts program

2012.926

Figures and heads made from mechanistic and architectural elements was one of Senbergs's earliest subjects. He returned to this motif recently in several monumental paintings, including *Paolozzi's city*, 2010, and *The elated city*, 2009.

Figure

1963

fibre-tipped pen on paper on cardboard

Courtesy of the artist and Niagara Galleries, Melbourne

While Senbergs is today considered one of the great draughtsmen of his generation, he rarely exhibited drawings during the 1960s and 1970s. The artist entered this drawing (together with a painting) in the 1963 Georges Invitation Art Prize.

People above the town 2

1963

enamel paint on composition board

Private collection, Melbourne

Senbergs's earliest paintings were made using commercial Dulux enamel paints on Masonite composition boards, a common practice among Melbourne painters at the time. The rhythmic interlocking forms of Senbergs's paintings recall the work of his early mentor and friend Leonard French.

The overseer

1965

enamel paint on composition board

Private Collection, courtesy Charles Nodrum Gallery, Melbourne. On long-term loan to La Trobe University Museum of Art, Bundoora

For Senbergs, the figure within the machine was a powerful metaphor for the dehumanising affects of modern industrial society. In 1965 he said, 'Everything seems to be dominated now by certain man-made things, and man himself is inside these things trying to fight as much as he can ... and when I see things around me in different places where I've been and worked, there is a terrible frustration, everybody wants to go out and do something which they think they'd like to do, and yet they're bound by their machinery, you could say'.

The main body

1966

colour screenprint on paper, ed. 2/6

Courtesy of the artist and Niagara Galleries, Melbourne

By the mid 1960s Senbergs' imagery was becoming increasingly sculptural, merging mechanistic and biomorphic elements, in part stimulated by his interest in the work of Scottish Pop artist Eduardo Paolozzi. Senbergs entered what he refers to as his 'axle-grease' period, when his colours became darker and more sombre, which he considered would enhance form in his work.

Tower

1966

colour screenprint on paper, artist's proof

National Gallery of Australia, Canberra
Gift of the artist, 2012, donated through the
Australian Government's Cultural Gifts program

2012.923

Untitled

1966

colour screenprint on paper

Courtesy of the artist and Niagara Galleries, Melbourne

The night parade

1966

enamel paint on composition board

Mornington Peninsula Regional Gallery

Gift of the artist, 1977

At the time of its creation, this was Senbergs's largest and most ambitious painting to date, and it formed the centrepiece of his 1966 exhibition at the Georges Gallery in Melbourne. The triptych format recalls the work of German Expressionist painter Max Beckmann, one of Senbergs's earliest and ongoing artistic heroes. In his review of the exhibition, critic Allan McCulloch wrote: 'Instead of simply looking at abstract pictures we have the feeling of standing on the perimeter of a vast industrial landscape in which hills and slagheaps, factories and cities are relentlessly pushed and jostled by an omni-present parade of silent watchers. The huge triptych "The night parade" ... illustrates the point'.

Cancel three

1966

enamel paint, screenprint on composition board

Courtesy of the artist and Niagara Galleries, Melbourne

Towards the end of 1965 Senbergs began to consider incorporating screenprinting into his painting. This is one of the first times he did so, printing a large cross over the painted image. *Cancel three* is a highly symbolic work, in which the artist questioned his artistic direction. Significantly, it was one of the last works he completed before leaving Australia for overseas in late 1966. It brought to a close the first period of Senbergs's work and signalled that he was ready for a new beginning.

Collapsing structure

1968

colour screenprint on paper, ed. 12/18

Courtesy of the artist and Niagara Galleries, Melbourne

This was the first screenprint that Senbergs made after his return to Melbourne from London in late 1967. In early 1968 the artist purchased an Artiscope Process Camera which allowed him to make photographic screenprinting stencils. In 2008 he recalled, 'The broken column had a lot to do with being in Europe ... I remember going to the Victoria and Albert Museum with columns and obelisks everywhere and the Natural History Museum next to it, looking at these incredible machines'.

Door

1968

colour screenprint on paper, artist's proof, edition of 3

Courtesy of the artist and Niagara Galleries, Melbourne

Observatory 1

1968

colour screenprint on paper, artist's proof, edition of 10

Courtesy of the artist and Niagara Galleries, Melbourne

Senbergs had been in London during the heyday of British Pop, and was familiar with the work of David Hockney, Derek Boshier and Ian Hamilton. The prints that Senbergs made immediately after his return from London, with their bright, flat colours and use of photographic imagery, come closest to a Pop sensibility.

Observation post 2

1968

synthetic polymer paint, oil screenprint on canvas

National Gallery of Australia, Canberra

Purchased 1971

71.4

On his return to Melbourne in late 1967, Senbergs's work changed dramatically. He ceased painting with enamel on Masonite composition boards, and instead started working with oil or acrylic on canvas and began to incorporate screenprinted elements into his paintings. Of his year in Europe he later recalled, 'I got a lot out of it, it completely made me revise and rethink a whole lot of things regarding my painting, my work, my attitudes and so on ... I felt very refreshed and confident when I came back.'

Sky wall

1968

synthetic polymer paint, oil screenprint on canvas

Courtesy of the artist and Niagara Galleries, Melbourne

Senbergs returned to Melbourne in the lead-up to the groundbreaking *The Field* exhibition at the National Gallery of Victoria, which focused attention on the new style of colour-field abstraction. Senbergs considers that for a time his own work was affected by the intense debates that this event precipitated. In 1984 he said: 'When one looks back at the work, perhaps even unconsciously at the time ... I see that some of my work is perhaps simpler, more minimal. In my case I was stripping down anyway ... but at the same time, I felt very strongly that I didn't want to lose my identity'.

We don't go together

1970

synthetic polymer paint, oil screenprint on canvas

Commonwealth Bank of Australia

'I was always trying to invent new forms, different forms, shapes which were recognisable – maybe something architectonic or machine-like, but not quite: and ambiguous ... I was trying to create something irrational, something out of the imagination but belonging to the world.'

Jan Senbergs, 2008

Column and still objects 1

1968

synthetic polymer paint, oil screenprint on canvas

The Edith Cowan University Art Collection

Donated through the Australian Government's Cultural Gifts Program by Mr Timothy James Bernadt

By the late 1960s Senbergs was considered one of Australia's leading printmakers, and his work was included in every major print exhibition. He was closely associated with Tate Adams, Head of Printmaking at RMIT University and a leading figure in the 1960s print revival, and was a close friend of George Baldessin, another important printmaker. In 1969 Senbergs held a solo exhibition of prints at Adams's Crossley Gallery in Melbourne, which included *Monument*, *Objects and accessories*, *Three (one doubtful)* and *Dream home*.

Top row, left to right

Monument

1969

colour screenprint on offset lithographic paper, ed. 7/17

Courtesy of the artist and Niagara Galleries, Melbourne

Three (one doubtful)

1969

colour screenprint on offset lithographic paper, ed. 12/17

Courtesy of the artist and Niagara Galleries, Melbourne

It's not easy

1969

colour screenprint on offset lithographic paper, ed. 12/13

National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne
Purchased, 1995

1995.648

Bottom row, left to right

Objects and accessories

1969

colour screenprint on offset lithographic paper, ed. 1/10

Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney
Gift of the artist 2008

290.2008

Dream home

1969

colour screenprint on offset lithographic paper, ed. 8/20

Courtesy of the artist and Niagara Galleries, Melbourne

Hill

1970

colour screenprint on offset lithographic paper, ed. 17/17

Courtesy of the artist and Niagara Galleries, Melbourne

Black garden

1972

synthetic polymer paint, oil screenprint on canvas on plywood

National Gallery of Australia, Canberra
Purchased 1973

73.24

In 1972 Senbergs exhibited sixteen new paintings at Melbourne's Gallery A, including *Black garden*, in which he created ambiguous cityscapes from surrealistic combinations of screenprinted fragments of images. With their absurdist sensibility and disjointed fragmentary images, these paintings emulate the writing of American postmodernist author Donald Barthelme, whose short stories Senbergs admired greatly and whom he credits with being a major influence upon him.

Garden plan with short path

1973

synthetic polymer paint, oil screenprint on canvas

National Gallery of Australia, Canberra

Purchased 1974

74.142

'There are certain images that fascinate me. You might go along an industrial area where there's steel and dirt and structures everywhere. But you might be lead up to some little office there, and someone's attempted to make a garden, a little garden. Obviously that person has cared for those plants and they've trimmed them, they've almost made the plants artificial ...The wholething is sort of absurd in a way.'

Jan Senbergs, 1979

Fort 2

1973

synthetic polymer paint, oil screenprint on canvas

National Gallery of Australia, Canberra

Purchased 1974

74.144

The paintings Senbergs created in 1973 in response to his selection to represent Australia at the 12th São Paulo Biennial in Brazil were larger and more imposing than his 1972 paintings, and often incorporated an image of a ramp to suggest entry into the forms. With their realistic modelling of architectural forms set against a horizon line, these works evoke the real world, yet remain defiantly resistant to interpretation.

Moundhouse

1973

synthetic polymer paint, oil screenprint on canvas

National Gallery of Australia, Canberra

Purchased 1974

74.141

'The printing technique was very important to me because I was a kind of scavenger of odd sorts of images. I mean a lot of those sort of shapes and forms were things that one saw perhaps in an old engraving book, a little detail of a section of some background somewhere and I'd look into it and see certain sorts of forms there ... I was a collector, a scavenger. I used to go to libraries and collect these images and I'd buy a lot of books.'

Jan Senbergs, 1979

Structure with black peaks

1973

synthetic polymer paint, oil screenprint on canvas

Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney

Purchased 1974

79.1974

'His buildings rise artificially in disjunctive perspectives from podiums like those of architectural engravings, and yet they are structures only possible in our late industrial century. The slagheaps may be reminiscent of early graphics of the industrial revolution, but the warehouses, the razor-back roofs, the chimneys belong to a later, more efficient age when machines can run themselves. This pictorial age is one that exaggerates the real and so admits the possibility that the structures can take over and obliterate the human: it is potentially Kafkaesque.'

Margaret Plant, 1973

Incoming minister

1971

synthetic polymer paint, oil screenprint on canvas

Private collection

Humour and the absurd have a special appeal to Senbergs. Occasionally images have been generated by a line in a book or poem, or a snippet of overheard conversation taken out of context.

'I was working in the studio, I had the radio on and on the news at one stage said "The incoming ministers in Canberra have arrived". It triggered something. I saw this image of "incoming ministers" floating in.'

Jan Senbergs, 2008

The flyer

1975

synthetic polymer paint, oil screenprint on canvas

Collection of Paul Guest, Melbourne

Altered Parliament House 1

1976

synthetic polymer paint, oil screenprint on canvas

National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne

Presented by Mrs Adrian Gibson as the winner of the 1976 Sir William Angliss Memorial Art Prize,
1977

A25-1977

While living in Canberra, on his walk home Senbergs would see Parliament House: 'I'd see this white glowing dreadnought in the distance ... that's the way it appeared, sort of floating, just this whiteness because it was lit up ... This form fascinated me. But also, and on another level, I was there in '75 when all the political things happened and [after that] it didn't have that sort of purity and whiteness that it appeared to have beforehand. In a way that gave me more liberty to change the imagery of the building.'

The good looking print or Harry was right

1975

colour screenprint, ed. 10/17

National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne

Presented through The Art Foundation of Victoria

by Professor Jenny Zimmer, Member 1997

1997.184

'When I was doing these prints and as I was coming to a conclusion to them, I also realised I was handling it in a more sophisticated way. The prints were becoming more refined, more in control ... [In this work] I was sending myself up in the title, saying, "This is a good-looking print". But it was a period when I was getting too confident. It was time to leave it alone, go back to the mark.'

Jan Senbergs, 2008

Modern monument in colour

1975

colour screenprint, ed. 14/26

National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne

Gift of Mr James Mollison, 1994

P73-1994

Structure, cloud

1975

colour screenprint, ed. 19/25

Courtesy of the artist and Niagara Galleries, Melbourne

A vision for builders

1975

colour screenprint, ed. 9/24

Courtesy of the artist and Niagara Galleries, Melbourne

Moundhouse

1975

colour screenprint, ed. 15/17

National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne

Purchased, 1976

P107-1976

'For me, *Moundhouse* is an attempt at an organic architectural structure – with windows you can't see through and a doorway you can't walk into, attached to the solid density of it. It is a building for not living in ... but to look at and ponder its strange symmetry.'

Jan Senbergs, 2008

Observatory of hard edges

1976

synthetic polymer paint, oil screenprint on canvas

National Gallery of Australia, Canberra

Purchased 1976

76.735

This is one of Seneberg's most architectonic images; its massing of asymmetrical forms, pronounced geometry and pale colours bring to mind the contemporaneous style of Brutalist architecture. In 1977 Senbergs was awarded the commission for a major work for the atrium of the High Court of Australia building in Canberra, then under construction. Designed by the architectural firm of Edwards Madigan Torzillo and Briggs, the High Court building is considered one of the most significant examples of Brutalism in Australia.

On his return to Melbourne after two years living in Canberra, Senbergs moved into a new studio in Bay Street, Port Melbourne, at the start of 1977. He became interested in the area's industrial landscapes and began making pastel drawings of these scenes. Drawing was a welcome departure from the highly technical and time-consuming processes involved in the production of the massive etched and anodised aluminium panels for the High Court commission, and a deliberate means of counteracting what he had begun to perceive as a 'tightness' creeping into his work.

Top to bottom, left to right

Port overpass

1977

pastel on paper

Courtesy of the artist and Niagara Galleries, Melbourne

Backyard, Bay Street

1977

pastel on paper

Courtesy of the artist and Niagara Galleries, Melbourne

Sugar factory

1980

pastel on paper

Courtesy of the artist and Niagara Galleries, Melbourne

New path

1979

pastel on paper

Courtesy of the artist and Niagara Galleries, Melbourne

Off Station Pier

1979

pastel on paper

Courtesy of the artist and Niagara Galleries, Melbourne

Port sheds

1979

pastel on paper

Courtesy of the artist and Niagara Galleries, Melbourne

Container

1980

pastel on paper

Courtesy of the artist and Niagara Galleries, Melbourne

Port structure

1979 Melbourne

pastel on paper

Courtesy of the artist and Niagara Galleries, Melbourne

Towards Prince's Pier

1979

pastel on paper

Courtesy of the artist and Niagara Galleries, Melbourne

'Yesterday I visited Jan Senbergs at his studio in Port Melbourne ... I was greatly impressed by what I saw: he has moved away from a photo image to observation, perhaps with [Max] Beckmann as his distant father. His line is slow and sullen and he creates a feeling of junk-heap menace ... His perspective is not often one of the vanishing point, but is more related to the spatial orientation in Chinese or Islamic art. This kind of perspective gives weight to an object; the sensation is abrupt and very blunt, ideally related to his vision.'

JOHN OLSEN, 1980

Top to bottom, left to right

Port piers and overpass

1979

pastel on paper

Port structure

1979

pastel on paper

Station Pier

1980

pastel on paper

Port signals

1980

pastel on paper

Courtesy of the artist and Niagara Galleries, Melbourne

Last image, Port Liardet

1981

synthetic polymer paint on canvas

Courtesy of the artist and Niagara Galleries, Melbourne

In 1983 the building in Port Melbourne in which Senbergs rented his studio was demolished to make way for a new development, leaving only the facade. The exposed interior appealed to Senebrgs's sense of the absurd, and in this work he included an image of himself painting in his upstairs studio.

Port Liardet 2

1981

synthetic polymer paint on canvas

Latrobe Regional Gallery, Morwell

Acquired with assistance from the

Caltex Victorian Government Art Fund and the Shire of Morwell

Winter Sunday – Port Liardet 1

1981

synthetic polymer paint on canvas

Private collection, Melbourne

Entrance to Port Liardet

1981

synthetic polymer paint on canvas

Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney

Purchased 1981

213.1981

With the completion of the High Court commission, in 1980 Senbergs began a new series of paintings based on the industrial landscapes of Port Melbourne. He discovered that more than 100 years earlier the area had been recorded in a series of watercolours by the naïve artist and local publican Wilbrahim Liardet. Senbergs based several of his paintings on Liardet's compositions, and titled his works *Port Liardet* in his honour.

Sticht's view to the smelters 1

1982

synthetic polymer paint on canvas

Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery, Hobart

Purchased with funds presented by
Renison Goldfields Consolidated, 1983

AG3582

Robert Carl Sticht was an American metallurgist who in 1897 became general manager of the copper mine at Mount Lyell on the remote and rugged west coast of Tasmania. There he introduced a new technique of smelting which released large amounts of deadly sulphur into the air, one of the principal agents in the destruction of the natural environment of the region.

In the *Copperopolis – Mt Lyell* series, Senbergs moved away from the smooth surfaces and clearly articulated forms of his *Port Liardet* paintings to a more gestural, painterly mode, in accord with the style of Neo-Expressionist painting of the early 1980s.

Copperopolis – Mt Lyell

1983

synthetic polymer paint on canvas

National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne

Purchased, 1984

AC1-1984

The *Copperopolis – Mt Lyell* series had its origins in the artist's visit to Queenstown, Tasmania, in January 1982. Intrigued by the region's deforested 'moonscapes' and the remnants of its mining past, Senbergs returned several months later to prepare for a new series of paintings. In addition to taking photographs and making sketches, Senbergs researched the history of the famous Mt Lyell copper mine. The resulting series combined the area's past with its present in an ambitious cycle of history and landscape painting.

Broadening the mind in Italy

1986, 1991

synthetic polymer paint on canvas

Private collection, Melbourne

City sloth

1986

pastel, synthetic polymer paint wash on paper

National Gallery of Australia, Canberra

Purchased from Gallery admission charges 1988

88.524

During the 1980s Senbergs's drawings became more ambitious in their scale and composition. He became known for his energetic and direct mark-making and his dense, all-over compositions.

In September 1977 Senbergs was awarded the major commission for the new High Court of Australia building in Canberra. He worked for more than two years on the commission, completing two major works, the *Constitution wall* and *States wall*. Consisting of a series of anodised and etched aluminium panels in architectural frames, the finished works were installed in November 1979. Designed by the architectural firm of Edwards Madigan Torzillo and Briggs, the High Court is considered one of the outstanding exemplars of late-modernist Brutalist architecture in Australia. It was opened by Queen Elizabeth II in May 1980.

Davis

1987

synthetic polymer paint on canvas

Private collection, Melbourne

'Davis is, very much, bits of machinery lying about, tins of food and layers and layers over the years left there, so it was fascinating. I wasn't being critical of it – I just found it fascinating visually ... and so in a picture I'd try and encompass a kind of feel of the place.'

Jan Senbergs, 2001

Mawson

1987

synthetic polymer paint on canvas

Private collection, Melbourne

'As in previous settlements in history, in Antarctica we are again squatting on the edge of yet another continent and bringing our cultural baggage with us. Already there is a sense of history there: architectural, social and visual.'

Jan Senbergs, 2002

Platcha

1987

synthetic polymer paint on canvas

Melbourne Convention and Exhibition Trust Collection

Bea Maddock being lifted onto the *Icebird* – Heard Island

1987

synthetic polymer paint on canvas

State Art Collection, Art Gallery of Western Australia, Perth
Purchased 1987

987/115

Senbergs was one of three artists invited by the Australian Antarctic Division to take part in the resupply Voyage Six to Antarctica as observers. Leaving Hobart in early January 1987, during their six-week journey the artists visited Heard Island, Scullin Monolith, Law Base, Davis, Mawson and the Russian base at Mirny.

This painting depicts fellow artist Bea Maddock who broke her leg while disembarking at Heard Island and needed to be winched back on board. Unfortunately, she was incapacitated for the remainder of the trip.

Borchgrevink's foot

1987

synthetic polymer paint on canvas

Courtesy of the artist and Niagara Galleries, Melbourne

'He was an outsider, and I like outsiders ... Yes, he was prickly and he was difficult, and he was a man with a sense of adventure and obsession.'

Jan Senbergs, 2000

While researching the history of Antarctica, Senbergs came across the story of Norwegian explorer Carsten Borchgrevink who claimed the distinction of being the first person to set foot on the continent in 1895, when he jumped off the landing boat ahead of his captain. Senbergs captures Borchgrevink's evident glee, yet has set this scene in the present, depicting Borchgrevink with a camera and sketchbook, disembarking from a modern boat. Not coincidentally, he bears a strong resemblance to Senbergs.

Antarctic night

1989

synthetic polymer paint and collage on canvas

National Gallery of Australia, Canberra

Purchased 1990

90.1213

'In a "cut-away" view, [*Antarctic night*] shows the interior of a winterer's hut with its wall covered in a "tapestry" of pin-up images – from the earliest "pin-up", the Venus of Willendorf, to the *Playboy* centrefolds of the 1950s and 1960s ... The more you saw of it, the more it seemed like an Antarctic Pop Art movement.'

Jan Senbergs, 2002

The swimmer

1994

synthetic polymer paint on canvas

Courtesy of the artist and Niagara Galleries, Melbourne

*'The swimmer, as Senbergs has widely acknowledged, grew out of his voyage to Antarctica in 1987. He would stand in the stern of the *Icebird*, stare at the churning sea in its wake and imagine what it would be like to be cast out on those perilous waters. How could one possibly hope to survive? The painting hangs on the notion of struggle against all odds – a heroic view of life that contends with the fatalism latent in the painting.'*

Patrick McCaughey, 2016

Blue angel of Wittenoom

1988

synthetic polymer paint on canvas

State Art Collection, Art Gallery of Western Australia, Perth
Purchased 1989

989/035

Allegheny Kane walk

1989 (dated 1991)

oil on canvas

Courtesy of the artist and Niagara Galleries, Melbourne

In 1989–90 Senbergs spent ten months living and teaching at Harvard University in the United States. He had long been interested in the work of early twentieth-century outsider artist John Kane, a miner from Pittsburgh, and Senbergs visited the sites where Kane had lived and painted. In 1991 Senbergs commented: 'When I was travelling through Pennsylvania I kept thinking about him, so in a way some of these pictures are based around his pictures. I travelled along that fifty, sixty miles leading to Pittsburgh, along a ghostland of steel mills on the Monongahela River – like a series of sculptures'.

Night life

1990

synthetic polymer paint on canvas

Courtesy of the artist and Niagara Galleries, Melbourne

Senbergs's American work responded to the tangled drama of its cities, with their paradoxes of rawness and elegance, energy and dilapidation.

Landfall

1990, 1994

synthetic polymer paint on canvas

Courtesy of the artist and Niagara Galleries, Melbourne

'[*Landfall*] is one of his finest and most mysterious paintings with a strong autobiographical undertone. The viewer is standing in the bow of a ship approaching an unknown shore. On the deck various instruments, cabinets, wrapped objects and miscellaneous tools and implements are casually organised into still-life configurations ... The exact nature of the equipment is uncertain and undisclosed. It is the typical Senbergs moment when "the actors have left the stage", leaving a richly orchestrated but ambiguous world behind.'

Patrick McCaughey, 2006

News

1991

synthetic polymer paint on canvas

Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane

Gift of Ray Hughes through the Queensland Art Gallery | Gallery of Modern Art Foundation 2016.

Donated through the Australian Government's Cultural Gifts Program

News was Senbergs's response to watching the unprecedented live coverage of the Gulf War on television. He envisaged a monstrous, devouring machine, observed in turn by a figure with a camera for a head who turns the brutal facts of the war into nightly entertainment.

Otway night

1994

synthetic polymer paint on canvas

Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney

Purchased with assistance from Ruth Komon 1994

594.1994

After purchasing a holiday house at Aireys Inlet, Senbergs became interested in the history of Victoria's west coast and the story of escaped convict William Buckley, 'the wild white man' who lived with the local Wathaurung people from 1803 until 1835 before being integrated back into colonial society.

Pulaski 1–6

1997

encaustic on hand-made paper

Courtesy of the artist and Niagara Galleries, Melbourne

While in the United States in 1990, Senbergs worked with printmaker Garner Tullis at his New York print workshop where he made a group of montotypes. On a return trip in 1997, Senbergs again worked with Tullis, this time producing small encaustic paintings where the artist painted with oil paint mixed with wax onto a warmed sheet of paper.

Pulaski Skyway

1998

oil stick, synthetic polymer paint wash on paper

Courtesy of the artist and Niagara Galleries, Melbourne

While working with master printmaker Garner Tullis in New York in 1990, Senbergs was taken to see the monumental Pulaski Skyway in New Jersey, a 1930s cantilevered bridge-causeway spanning almost six kilometres. For Senbergs this massive relic of an earlier industrial era became an icon of the American experience. Occupying a halfway place between drawing and painting, *Pulaski Skyway* is one of Senbergs's most ambitious works, a complex, dynamic composition which conveys the raw energy of this semi-industrial urban scene.

Centre row

New Guinea sheilas triptych

1993 Melbourne

pastel on paper

Courtesy of the artist and Niagara Galleries, Melbourne

Bottom row

New Guinea male triptych

1993

pastel on paper

Courtesy of the artist and Niagara Galleries, Melbourne

'I enjoy the freedom of drawing, the directness of what I call my "Long Arm Drawing" with a black pastel or an oil stick, where there's no room for corrections or embellishments – dancing in front of a sheet of paper, keeping a spontaneous line, and if you hesitate, it shows. It's "unforgiving" drawing and if you're out of form you lose, and sheets of paper end up in the bin. Like an athlete or a dancer, you've got to put in the hours to make the confident mark.'

Jan Senbergs, 2016

Top row, left to right

Trader Hughes African bloke

1993

pastel on paper

Young African female

1995

oil stick on paper

New Guinea warrior

1993

pastel on paper

Courtesy of the artist and Niagara Galleries, Melbourne

‘One evening at a friend’s house I started noticing a small tribal figure, and by the end of the evening I asked if I could borrow it, and I made a lot of both big and little drawings from it. After that I started borrowing New Guinean and African tribal figures from various friends and went on drawing them. They’re sculptural, they’re also static, and they’re fascinating. But while I wanted to draw them as figures, I also wanted to reinvent them somehow. I was very conscious that Picasso and Braque used African figures to create Cubism back at the beginning of last century.’

Jan Senbergs, 2006

The Port Liardet limner

1992

sugar-lift aquatint and plate tone on paper, ed. 5/25
printed by APW Senior Printer Martin King, Australian Print
Workshop, Melbourne

National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne

Gift of Douglas Kagi through the Australian Government's Cultural Gifts Program, 2014

2014.219.a-d

In the United States Senbergs became interested in the work of naïve colonial artists known as 'limners': itinerant artists who would paint portraits or pictures of prize livestock and homes to commission. In this work Senbergs included an image of himself, brushes in hand, walking through a Port Melbourne landscape. In 2015 he said: 'It's a remembrance of the American scene and the limner ... it's sort of a working man's painting ... I tried to make it into a similar record of my being around Port Melbourne as a limner was on a farm in his time'.

Studio interior

1993

pastel on paper

Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney

Gift of Mrs R Komon 1993

535.1993.a-b

‘Drawings and paintings of the artist’s studio from the seventeenth to the twenty-first century have invariably brought with them an autobiographical undertone or allegorical inference. Senbergs’s studio drawings are no exception. They are extended accounts of how the substance of things feeds his imagination. The density of the drawings is their immediate effect. The clutter of the studio – from work tables to stacks of finished canvases, pots of paint to drawers for drawings and prints – fills the artist’s world.’

Patrick McCaughey, 2016

Studio interior

1995

pastel on paper

National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne

Purchased through The Art Foundation of Victoria with the assistance of Mr Robert Raynor AM,
Honorary Life Benefactor, 1997

1997.93.a-d

Studio, tool bench

1995

pastel on paper

Courtesy of the artist and Niagara Galleries, Melbourne

'Drawing on a large sheet of paper with an oil stick is an intense and messy business. At the end of it all you're covered in grease, as the oil stick has melted in your hand, and there's a feeling of relief if you've managed to sustain the line. Drawing and painting is being challenged these days, but I believe that even in our sophisticated digital world of new technologies and other marvels, the direct and primitive black mark on a wall is still the omnipotent sign of creativity.'

Jan Senbergs, 2016

Helen's kitchen

1995

pastel on paper

Courtesy of the artist and Niagara Galleries, Melbourne

First column, top to bottom

Still life, Aireys Inlet

1996

pencil on paper

Courtesy of the artist and Niagara Galleries, Melbourne

France (near Avignon)

1984

pencil on paper

Courtesy of the artist and Niagara Galleries, Melbourne

Yarra

1996

pencil on paper

Courtesy of the artist and Niagara Galleries, Melbourne

Second column, top to bottom

St Patrick's Cathedral, Melbourne

1997

pencil on paper

Courtesy of the artist and Niagara Galleries, Melbourne

Flinders Street Station

1996

pencil on paper

Courtesy of the artist and Niagara Galleries, Melbourne

Mt Tom Price

1986

pencil on paper

Courtesy of the artist and Niagara Galleries, Melbourne

Third column, top to bottom

Tex

2000

pencil on paper

Courtesy of the artist and Niagara Galleries, Melbourne

M.C.G.

1996

pencil on paper

Courtesy of the artist and Niagara Galleries, Melbourne

Thomson River Dam

1984

pencil on paper

Courtesy of the artist and Niagara Galleries, Melbourne

Fourth column, top to bottom

Looking at Double Bay

1984

pencil on paper

Courtesy of the artist and Niagara Galleries, Melbourne

First view Little Lev

2007

pencil on paper

Courtesy of the artist and Niagara Galleries, Melbourne

60th above Melbourne

1999

pencil on paper

Courtesy of the artist and Niagara Galleries, Melbourne

As well as his large-scale drawings, it has been Senbergs's practice to make small, on-the-spot drawings in his sketchbooks.

These are not intended for exhibition; rather they are references for future compositions, or private records of places visited.

First column, top to bottom

Jeff and Ermes house

2001

pencil on paper

Courtesy of the artist and Niagara Galleries, Melbourne

Jeffrey Smart's 'palace'

2001

pencil on paper

Courtesy of the artist and Niagara Galleries, Melbourne

Pittsburgh

1990

pencil on paper

Courtesy of the artist and Niagara Galleries, Melbourne

Second column, top to bottom

Charles River, Harvard

1989

pencil on paper

Courtesy of the artist and Niagara Galleries, Melbourne

Flinders Street Railway Station, Melbourne

1996

pencil on paper

Courtesy of the artist and Niagara Galleries, Melbourne

Paradise Road

1996

pencil on paper

Courtesy of the artist and Niagara Galleries, Melbourne

Third column, top to bottom

Venice floating 1

2007, printed 2008

etching on paper, artist's proof, edition of 10

printed by APW printer Simon White, Australian Print Workshop, Melbourne

Courtesy of the artist and Niagara Galleries, Melbourne

Riga – from the Laine Hotel, September 29

2004

pencil on paper

Courtesy of the artist and Niagara Galleries, Melbourne

(Untitled)

pages [12–13] in *Palmetum*, published by Lyre Bird Press,
Townsville, 2002

1995

lithograph on paper, ed. 37/40

printed by APW Senior Printer Martin King, Australian Print
Workshop, Melbourne

Courtesy of the artist and Niagara Galleries, Melbourne

Senbergs first met master printmaker Tate Adams in 1963 when he was head of RMIT University's Printmaking department. Adams was at the forefront of the printmaking revival in Australia and an early champion of Senbergs's work. Since that time Adams and Senbergs have collaborated on several projects.

(Untitled)

pages [3–4] in *In the Studio: Original Lithographs by Jan Senbergs*, published by Lyre Bird Press & Zimmer Editions, Melbourne, 1998

1998

lithograph and letterpress text on paper, ed. 12/30

Courtesy of the artist and Niagara Galleries, Melbourne

Cumberland River

1996

synthetic polymer paint on canvas

Courtesy of the artist and Niagara Galleries, Melbourne

While Senbergs's earlier landscapes usually included references to human presence and, indeed, the despoliation of the natural environment, in his Otways landscapes of the mid 1990s he painted this region as an Arcadian, untouched wilderness.

Sydney

1998

synthetic polymer paint on canvas

Collection of McDonald's Australia Limited

Melbourne

1998–99

synthetic polymer paint on canvas

State Library of Victoria, Melbourne

Gift of the Gualtiero Vaccari Foundation in recognition of services provided by the State Library to the Italian Community, 1999

H99.151

‘[The] map-like images of the city that I’ve developed – of Melbourne, Sydney, Wollongong, Barcelona – they come out of a fascination with map-making, particularly early map-making ... I started to look for an imagined way of painting and drawing actual places like Melbourne or Sydney: not exactly what you see in front of you but what you know to be there ... It’s like those early maps, imaginary maps where people were drawing what they knew, not what they saw or measured.’

Jan Senbergs, 2006

Barcelona 1

2001

synthetic polymer paint on paper

Private collection, Melbourne

In 2001 Senbergs undertook a three-month residency at the Australia Council studio in Barcelona. It was a richly productive time and Senbergs was particularly struck by the contrast between the rambling, organic nature of Barcelona's medieval centre and the rational grid of its nineteenth-century planned development.

A cloud for Ryder

2006

synthetic polymer paint on paper

Courtesy of the artist and Niagara Galleries, Melbourne

Albert Pinkham Ryder was a nineteenth-century American visionary painter known for his moody and dreamlike landscapes. Senbergs has always been interested in outsider and naïve artists, and as a self-taught artist feels an affinity with them. In 1973 he said: 'I like to think like a primitive as much as I can, I like the primitives, I love primitive painting, I love the painting of mad men, I respond more to that – I believe them more, actually, than I believe a lot of modern painters'.

Melancholy landscape

2006

synthetic polymer paint on paper

Private collection, Melbourne

Otway monolith

2007

synthetic polymer paint on canvas

Private collection, Melbourne

Coastal settlement

2009

synthetic polymer paint on canvas

Private collection, Melbourne

The aftermath – with 'K' tree

2014

synthetic polymer paint on paper

Private collection, Melbourne

City heat and the fires

2014

synthetic polymer paint on paper

Collection of Mecca Macnab, Melbourne

Code Red day 1

2014

synthetic polymer paint on paper

Private collection, Melbourne

'In January 2014 in Melbourne we had four days of forty-plus degrees of intense heat – with bushfires raging in the countryside casting a pall of acrid smoke over the extended city and all around ominous skies that seemed to portend an inferno that would be all engulfing. That oppressive atmosphere and that sense of threat at the edges of the extended city seemed as if an overwhelming and merciless force was at the gates and ready to break down the barricades.'

Jan Senbergs, 2015

The fiery and merciless landscape

2014

synthetic polymer paint on paper

E.Y.K. Honig collection, Melbourne

Fire and smoke 1

2014 Melbourne

synthetic polymer paint on paper

Private collection, Melbourne

The fire moves on 1

2014

synthetic polymer paint on paper

E.Y.K. Honig collection, Melbourne

The fire moves on 2

2014

synthetic polymer paint on paper

Private collection

The overwhelming red fire front

2014 Melbourne

synthetic polymer paint on paper

E.Y.K. Honig collection, Melbourne

Still we stand – January 2014

2014 Melbourne

synthetic polymer paint on paper

Private collection, Melbourne

The elated city

2009

synthetic polymer paint on canvas

Courtesy of the artist and Niagara Galleries, Melbourne

Paolozzi's city

2010

synthetic polymer paint on canvas

TarraWarra Museum of Art, Healesville

Acquired 2011

As a young artist in the 1960s, Senbergs greatly admired Scottish Pop artist Edouardo Paolozzi's strange fusions of machine and organic forms, and explored similar ideas in his own paintings and screenprints. In *Paolozzi's city* Senbergs has created a fantastical head out of buildings and roads, and pays homage to one of his first artistic heroes.

Driving around the Port Kembla sculptures on a Saturday night

2003

synthetic polymer paint on paper

Private collection, Sydney

As a young artist, Senbergs was impressed by the work of German Expressionist artist Max Beckmann, and has continued to hold him in high regard. Senberg's *Driving around the Port Kembla sculptures on a Saturday night* shares the compression of space, distortions of forms and dynamic linear quality characteristic of Beckmann's paintings.

Melbourne capriccio 3

2009

synthetic polymer paint on canvas

National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne

Purchased with funds donated by

The Hugh D. T. Williamson Foundation, 2009

2009.437

In the history of painting, a capriccio refers to an architectural fantasy where buildings and other architectural elements and places come together in imaginary settings. Senbergs's *Melbourne capriccio* offers the viewer the pleasure of a bird's-eye view of familiar landmarks, seen through a rich blend of memory and imagination.

Geelong capriccio (if Geelong were settled instead of Melbourne)

2010

synthetic polymer paint on canvas

Deakin University Art Collection

'One of the rarest qualities in contemporary painting is wit ... Jan Senberg's *Geelong capriccio* is in every way a painting of wit, its single and absurd proposition as to what the world would look like if Geelong had become the capital and the site of Melbourne remained open paddocks ... It seems to be a very Antipodean painting: the upside-down world, which Europe imagined Australia to be, a place where anything might happen.'

Patrick McCaughey, 2010

Extended Melbourne labyrinth

2013

oil stick, synthetic polymer paint wash

National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne

Yvonne Pettengell Bequest, 2014

2014.17.a-d

Collapsed object no. 2

1969

synthetic polymer paint, oil screenprint on canvas

Courtesy of the artist and Niagara Galleries, Melbourne

'I started work on the mound idea and developed it into quite a number of variations. The painting *Collapsed object* was the first in 1969 (the one that won the Georges Prize) except it was in the form of a pyramid. A mound is partly debris, partly natural phenomena and partly man-made – all three together. I was fascinated by it.'

JAN SENBERGS, 2008

While in London, Senbergs became interested in the work of land artists such as Walter De Maria and Robert Smithson, and formulated the idea of making his own sculptures. Almost immediately on his return to Melbourne Senbergs constructed five 4.5-metre high sculptures fabricated from sheet metal. They were titled *Outdoor Objects: An Experiment in an Environment* and were installed on author Frank Dalby Davidson's property at Arthurs Creek, Victoria, in November 1967. The works were removed approximately eighteen months later after a storm rendered them unstable. Only photographs of the sculptures survive. Although this was Senbergs's only major foray into making sculpture, he has often referred to himself as a 'frustrated sculptor', and sculptural forms are prevalent in his paintings and screenprints of the 1960s and 1970s.

Senbergs began painting while completing his screenprinting apprenticeship. In the late 1950s he exhibited in *The Herald Outdoor Art Exhibition* and made collaborative paintings with fellow apprentice Ted Cross, exhibited under the pseudonym Jed Ossen. In 1960, while still an apprentice, Senbergs held his first solo exhibition which was opened by Roger Kemp. From 1963 onwards he increasingly became known as a printmaker, and his prints were included in numerous exhibitions. In 1964 Senbergs began his long association with the Rudy Komon Gallery in Sydney; his first solo exhibition was held there in 1966.

Multiple Art Prints

(Jan Senbergs demonstrating screenprinting in his Cheltenham studio c. 1970)

Duration: 6:07 minutes (looped)

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© ABC TV 1971

In 1977 Senbergs took a studio in the upstairs of a shopfront in Bay Street, Port Melbourne. Over the next few years he began to draw the industrial landscapes of Port Melbourne and Fishermans Bend, culminating in the *Port Liardet* series of paintings, which were exhibited in Sydney and Melbourne in 1981.

In preparation for a series of paintings based upon the history and landscapes of Queenstown in Tasmania, Senbergs researched the history of the Mt Lyell copper mine, making reference to Geoffrey Blainey's classic study *The Peaks of Mt Lyell* (1954). He visited the area to make sketches and take photographs, and went into the underground mine. In many of the resulting paintings, Senbergs did not use Western linear perspective but rather multiple points of view, in the manner of classical Chinese landscape painting, which he admired.

In 1984 Senbergs was commissioned by the State Bank of New South Wales (now Commonwealth Bank) to make a suite of three large tapestries for the foyer of its new building in Martin Place, Sydney. The tapestries were woven by the Australian Tapestry Workshop, Melbourne, between 1985 and 1987 and were exhibited at Westpac Gallery at the Victorian Arts Centre prior to being installed in Sydney. This small tapestry was made as a test in preparation for the large works.

In 1987, on the invitation of the Australian Antarctic Division, Senbergs was one of three artists invited to travel to Antarctica on their annual resupply mission. They left Hobart on the MV *Icebird* in January 1987, visited Heard Island, Scullin Monolith, Law Base, Davis, Mawson and the Russian base at Mirny, and returned six weeks later. Senbergs recorded the trip in drawings and photographs, and kept a journal. He had prepared for it by researching the history of Antarctica, and on his return completed a series of large paintings on this subject.

Jan Senbergs: Observation–Imagination

Jan Senbergs is one of Australia's most distinctive artists. He is both an acute observer and a creator of fantastical imagery. Since his first exhibition in 1960, Senbergs's work has undergone many transformations of style, technique and subject, yet there have also been recurring themes and motifs. Elements from his very first works have reappeared, reworked and reinterpreted, throughout his career.

Senbergs's artistic imagination has been fed by many sources, including his love of literature and poetry; his interest in non-Western artistic traditions and the work of outsider artists; journeys to distant locales as well as familiar places close to home. The artist has often referred to himself as a 'visual scavenger' of images – photographs, scientific diagrams, maps – which he transforms and incorporates into his own work. Above all, Senbergs's art reflects his essential humanism, humour and wideranging curiosity.

Born in Latvia in 1939 at the beginning of the Second World War, which was to have a devastating impact on his family, at the age of ten Jan Senbergs migrated with his family to Australia and settled in Melbourne. He developed an early interest in art, in part encouraged by artist Leonard French who was a substitute teacher at his high school. In 1956 Senbergs commenced a four-year commercial screenprinting apprenticeship. He became friendly with a group of older artists, including French, Leonard Crawford, George Johnson and Roger Kemp, and began painting in his own time.

Senbergs's first solo exhibition in 1960 reflected French's influence; however, by the mid 1960s he had developed his own style and was considered one of Melbourne's up-and-coming younger artists. In 1966 he was awarded the prestigious Helena Rubinstein Travelling Art Scholarship and lived in Europe for twelve months. Senbergs's return to Melbourne in October 1967 marked a new direction for his art. He experimented with making sculpture and ceased painting in enamels, instead using oil and acrylic paints on canvas. His images became more minimal, his colours brighter and flatter. Most significantly, Senbergs began incorporating screenprinted elements into his paintings.

The 1970s were a highly productive and successful decade for Senbergs. In 1973 he represented Australia at the 12th São Paulo Biennial in Brazil with eighteen paintings of dystopian, post-industrial landscapes eerily empty of human presence. Literature – particularly the work of American postmodernist Donald Barthelme and magical realist writers such as Jorge Luis Borges – continued to be an important influence on his work during this time.

From 1975 to 1976 Senbergs was a Creative Fellow at the Australian National University, Canberra, and his work became increasingly sophisticated in its use of screenprinting techniques. In 1977, soon after Senbergs's return to Melbourne, he was awarded the major artwork commission for the new High Court of Australia building in Canberra. Although this was to occupy much of his energies, Senbergs also began drawing the industrial landscapes around his Port Melbourne studio.

In the early 1980s Senbergs's work changed again. While previously he had sought to create wholly fictional forms, in his *Port Liardet* and *Copperopolis – Mt Lyell* paintings, he responded to specific places and their history. At the same time he ceased screenprinting and began painting in a more gestural, expressive style.

During the 1980s Senbergs undertook several journeys to remote locations – the west coast of Tasmania, north-western Australia and Antarctica – each of which gave rise to a major series of paintings. Senbergs responded to the unique history and landscapes of these places, and the resulting works are a rich blend of imaginative interpretation and careful observation.

In January 1987, on the invitation of the Australian Antarctic Division, Senbergs travelled to Antarctica on a six-week resupply voyage. The *Antarctica* series of paintings are his most ambitious in terms of scale and conception; a grand narrative cycle recording the artist's voyage and depicting the history and landscapes of the little-known continent.

In 1989 Senbergs was the first Australian artist appointed to the Chair of Australian Studies at Harvard University in the United States. He lived in America for ten months from 1989 to 1990 and it was an immensely stimulating time artistically and intellectually for the mid-career artist. In addition to lecturing on Australian art and teaching a drawing class, Senbergs worked prolifically in his Harvard studio, responding to the dynamism and energy of the American scene.

Since the 1990s drawing has become increasingly important to Senbergs, and the distinction between his drawings and paintings has become less clear. In the late 1970s Senbergs had made pastels of Port Melbourne, and in the early 1990s, he again turned his energies towards drawing. In these large-scale works, Senbergs used what he refers to as his 'Long Arm Drawing' technique, in which he stands with his arm outstretched in front of a sheet of paper pinned to the wall, moving his entire arm and body to make a mark. Senbergs's preferred medium was black pastel or oil stick, the latter giving a heavy black line and which could also be angled to provide a sharp edge.

From 1993 to 1995 Senbergs worked on two major series of drawings concurrently; studio interiors and drawings of African, Pre-Columbian and New Guinean sculptures. While the studio interiors are characterised by their dense, all-over accumulation of marks which perfectly describe the ordered cluttered of Senbergs's studio, the sculptural figures are isolated against their background. Senbergs uses positive and negative space to great effect, and his vigorous line work creates a sense of movement and imbues the sculptures with individual personality.

In contrast to the enclosed, almost claustrophobic spaces of the studio interiors, by the end of the 1990s Senbergs had embarked upon a new series of map-like paintings, sprawling bird's-eye views of cities, which continue to occupy him to the present day. Initially inspired by seeing Melbourne from a high-rise building, these works reflect the artist's long fascination with early and non-Western map-making traditions. Like these maps, Senbergs's views are not scientifically measured recordings; rather they are imaginative constructions of place based on observation and memory.

At the same time Senbergs began his most extensive group of landscapes, painting the rugged terrain of the Victorian west coast, an area that he knew well. While some of these works depict untouched wilderness, others include roads and townships and employ multiple perspectives to convey the experience of travelling through the landscape. Senbergs's recent *Heat – Fire – Smoke* series is a response to the 2014 bushfires in Victoria, a new subject for the artist, in which he reflects on the cycle of destruction and regeneration in nature.