

ROGER KEMP

VISIONARY MODERNIST

ARTWORK LABELS

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Roger Kemp: Visionary Modernist

Roger Kemp (1908–1987) was a key figure in twentieth-century Australian art and one of Australia's great abstractionists. In charting his development, we see a sequence of creative phases that reveal a clear trajectory. The evolution of Kemp's artistic career can be divided into interrelated chapters, beginning with his earliest paintings of symbolic landscapes and angular dancing figures; through his work of the 1950s, where the human form is transfigured and becomes part of an abstract structure; to his late works that reveal an artist whose concerns go beyond the physical world. In these highly resolved later paintings of the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s the geometric structure heightens the symbolic richness contained within. Kemp's works from this period are charged with great emotional energy and are the pinnacle of an artistic and spiritual journey.

Roger Kemp's first exhibition was in 1945 and across his lifetime he held more than twenty solo exhibitions. In 1978, on his seventieth birthday, the National Gallery of Victoria and four other institutions honoured him with a major joint survey exhibition. Now, more than forty years later, *Roger Kemp: Visionary Modernist* presents a retrospective of Kemp's extraordinary career – a timely and comprehensive review of one of the masters of abstract art in Australia.

Drawing study

1935

oil on cardboard

Collection of the Kemp Estate

Untitled (Study for National Gallery of Victoria Travelling Scholarship submission)

1935

oil, gouache and graphite on cardboard

Collection of the Kemp Estate

Figures in Rhythm (Composition in line world)

1936–39

oil on cardboard

Collection of the Kemp Estate

Music in nature

c. 1936

oil on cardboard

National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne

Presented by the Kemp Trust through the
Australian Government's Cultural Gifts Program, 2014

2014.327

Untitled

1936–37

oil on cardboard

Collection of the Kemp Estate

Roger Kemp

Australia 1908–87

Music movement 1

1936–40

oil and pencil on cardboard

Presented by the Kemp Trust through the
Australian Government's Cultural Gifts Program, 2014

2014.326

Untitled (Intertwining figures)

1936–40

oil on cardboard

Collection of the Kemp Estate

Early studies

The National Gallery of Victoria Art School held part-time evening classes in addition to its full-time fine art program. The evening classes were held five nights a week and were a place where both experienced and amateur artists could work together. Kemp enrolled in 1929 and enjoyed working with other artistically minded students so, following his first year, he re-enrolled in 1930, and again in 1931 and 1932.

Kemp was in his early twenties when the Great Depression took hold and his family, feeling he needed a job, convinced him to undertake a vocationally oriented course. So, in 1932, Kemp commenced studies in commercial art at the Working Men's College (now RMIT University). The program was design-focused and a year into the course Kemp concluded it was not the direction he wished to pursue, so he went back to the National Gallery of Victoria Art School in 1933 and studied painting full-time until 1935. In his final year of study Kemp was shortlisted for the prestigious National Gallery of Victoria Travelling Scholarship. He failed to place in the award and in a further blow to his confidence, a harsh newspaper review at the time described his entry as 'an enlargement of a facile rapid sketch'.

For almost a decade Kemp cocooned himself in his studio, continuing to paint but not showing his work.

Spirit Forms (Figures in rhythm)

1936–39

oil on cardboard

Collection of the Kemp Estate

Green bridge and figures

1935–40

oil on cardboard

Collection of the Kemp Estate

Untitled (Landscape painting)

1936–37

enamel paint on cardboard

Collection of the Kemp Estate

Metamorphosis

1939–42

oil on cardboard

National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne

Presented by the Kemp Trust through the
Australian Government's Cultural Gifts Program, 2019

Developing a visual language

In Kemp's works from the mid 1930s we see him defiantly challenge the orthodox, technical approach he was taught at art school and begin to develop his own visual language. These works were typically painted with oils on low-quality cardboard, which he would often re-use or paint on the back of. With their dry brushy strokes and fresh colour the flattened forms have been linked to George Bell's teaching of the 1930s and the influence of Paul Cézanne.

Kemp was painting with great immediacy and urgency during this period, and one can see a spontaneous confidence in his work. Inspired by performances of the Ballets Russes in Melbourne and drawing on his abiding interest in music, Kemp created a series of exuberant paintings and drawings that were a defining point in his early development. In works such as *Untitled (Ballet painting)*, 1936–40, and *Figures and flowers*, 1936–40, the dancing figures are charged with energy and movement. They leap and lunge into space, capturing the sensual energy of the Ballets Russes. The works are a dramatic synthesis of art and performance that freed Kemp's imagination and enabled him to find his direction as an artist. They were also the beginnings of Kemp's use of the figure as both a symbol and a structural element – a key component that evolved into a characteristic visual device.

Release

late 1930s

oil on cardboard

Collection of the Kemp Estate

Untitled (Ballet painting)

1936–40

oil and pencil on cardboard

Collection of the Kemp Estate

Figures and flowers

1936–40

oil and pencil on cardboard

National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne

Presented by the Kemp Trust through the
Australian Government's Cultural Gifts Program, 2019

Metaphysical revolution (Development of rotundity in orchestration)

1936–40

oil on cardboard

Collection of the Kemp Estate

Untitled (Flowers in landscape)

1936–37

oil on cardboard

Collection of the Kemp Estate

Untitled (Ballet painting)

1936–40

oil and pencil on cardboard

Collection of the Kemp Estate

Music forms

1938–41

enamel paint on cardboard

National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne

Presented by the Kemp Trust through the
Australian Government's Cultural Gifts Program, 2014

2014.329

World today (Extending figures)

1945–48

enamel paint on composition board

Collection of the Kemp Estate

Untitled

1945–48

enamel paint composition board

Collection of the Kemp Estate

Untitled

1945–55

enamel paint on cardboard on composition board

Collection of the Kemp Estate

Metaphysical paintings

Although the postwar period was an invigorating time for modern art in Melbourne, Kemp maintained a relatively isolated existence away from the prevailing scene. He was profoundly affected by the Second World War and in the decade after its end created some of his most powerfully confronting paintings, dominated by epic and sometimes menacing imagery. Compared with the almost exultant mood of his earlier work, Kemp's paintings from this period contain dark and sinister images of tightly packed figures and enormous human heads, and his angular figures became more and more compressed and abstracted.

In the mid 1940s Kemp began using enamel paint on sheets of proprietary composition board (sold under the trade name masonite). Using a standard sheet size enabled him to work on a consistent scale, and the use of enamel paint gave greater saturation of colour and added intensity to his paintings.

Kemp's first solo exhibition was at Velasquez Gallery in 1945, and two years later he held a second at Kozminsky Galleries. By 1947 there was a growing interest in his work and it was attracting favourable attention, particularly among other artists.

Untitled

1945–48

enamel paint on cardboard

National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne

Presented by the Kemp Trust through the
Australian Government's Cultural Gifts Program, 2019

Reconstructed forms

1948–52

enamel paint on composition board

National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne

Presented by the Kemp Trust through the
Australian Government's Cultural Gifts Program, 2019

Untitled

1945–55

enamel paint on cardboard on composition board

Collection of the Kemp Estate

Developing rhythm

c. 1960

enamel paint on composition board

Collection of the Kemp Estate

Conception (Contemporary symphony)

1945–55

enamel paint on composition board

Collection of the Kemp Estate

Contemporary conception

c. 1959

oil on composition board

National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne

Gift of Colonel Aubrey H. L. Gibson (Rtd), 1959

368-5

Maturity

From the mid 1950s and into the 1960s Kemp's art became increasingly abstracted, with the figure disguised within the overall structure of the painting. A distinctive visual repertoire of motifs and symbols evolved and his compositions became more complex and sophisticated. He also went beyond the immediate world, exploring the relationship between humankind and an expanded notion of the cosmos.

By the late 1950s and early 1960s, almost as a respite from his earlier, intense paintings of figures, Kemp produced a number of works in which references to space and the universe became central. These images present a sense of calmness and freedom. Works such as *Nocturne (Figures in space)*, 1958–61, and *Flight in space I*, 1961 – c. 1965, mark a resolution in Kemp's practice and signal his growing maturity as a painter.

Kemp was inspired by mysticism and spirituality in their various forms and they were recurrent themes in his art. He won the Blake Prize for Religious Art twice: once in 1968 for *The Cross* and again in 1970 as a joint winner for *Denial*. While not religious in a traditional sense, Kemp had developed an interest in Christian Science and theosophy in the 1930s and this continued to influence his practice throughout his career.

Organised forms

1961

enamel paint on composition board

National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne

Presented by the National Gallery Society of Victoria as the winner of The John McCaughey Memorial Prize, 1962

1076-5

Piano movement

1960–62

enamel paint on composition board

Collection of the Kemp Estate

Flight in space I

1961 – c. 1965

enamel paint on composition board

National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne

Purchased through The Art Foundation of Victoria with the assistance of the
National Gallery Society of Victoria, Governor, 1983

A41-1983

Untitled

1962–64

enamel paint on composition board

Collection of the Kemp Estate

Force

1950–54

enamel paint on composition board

Collection of the Kemp Estate

Movement into space II

1953–56

enamel paint on composition board

Collection of the Kemp Estate

Ascension

1960–65

synthetic polymer paint on composition board

National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne

Purchased through The Art Foundation of Victoria with the assistance of the
National Gallery Society of Victoria, Governor, 1983

A40-1983

Extended forms

1958–61

enamel on composition board

Collection of the Kemp Estate

Nocturne (Figures in space)

1958–61

enamel on composition board

Collection of the Kemp Estate

Printmaking

Between 1971 and 1976 Kemp produced a major body of large-scale etchings. He had been introduced to printmaking by Arthur Boyd in London, and from 1972 began working with fellow artist and master printmaker George Baldessin at his print studio in the Winfield Building on Melbourne's Collins Street. Kemp developed a particular technique where the plates were deeply etched, often using drypoint, and then printed with as much ink and plate tone as possible. The process produced distinctive images of uncompromising power and intensity.

Movement six

1973 printed 1973

etching, magnesium plate

Collection of the Kemp Estate

Sequence ten

1972 printed 1982

etching, magnesium plate

Collection of the Kemp Estate

Movement five

1973–74 printed 1976

etching, magnesium plate

Collection of the Kemp Estate

Relativity

1972

etching

National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne

Purchased, 1973

P11-1973

Order and balance

There is a synthesis of Kemp's imagery in his works of the 1970s. We see its evolution into a sophisticated visual language. Working with massive webs of geometry, he refined his vocabulary of graphic devices and brought the elements into balance.

In particular, Kemp's fascination with the square and the circle, and the relationship between the two, had evolved into a key part of his visual dialectic. They became the basic units of his art, representing the dynamic and the stable. Fragmented and re-formed, they jostle each other like charged particles, causing the forms to rotate and multiply, and bringing movement and rhythm into the paintings.

In articulating the connection between these two visual elements, Kemp stated:

'I realise the significance of the circle and the square and the relationship between the two – the metamorphosis between the two is where I have tried to place myself and work in relation to the subjective and objective symbols ... The circle and the square I have taken [so] far that I have broken the boundaries of both those things and one finishes up with the breaking of the square and the other with the breaking of the circle, which allows the development of creativity itself to occur'.

Order and direction in space

1973–74

synthetic polymer paint on canvas

Collection of the Kemp Estate

Lunar passage

1969

synthetic polymer paint on paper on canvas

Private collection, Melbourne

10 Australian Artists: Roger Kemp

1975

television documentary

ABC TV / Visual Arts Board co-production

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Left to right, top to bottom

Sketchbook

c. 1930s

Sketchbook

c. 1930s

Untitled drawing

1930s

Untitled drawing

1930s

Roger Kemp

c. 1930s

Velasquez Gallery, Melbourne, exhibition catalogue (Kemp's first exhibition)

1945

Kosminsky's Gallery, Melbourne, exhibition catalogue

1947

Kemp's backyard studio in North Balwyn, with daughters Helen, Michel, Elizabeth and Jenny

1953–54

...continued overleaf

Roger Kemp with wife Merle and their four daughters

1950s

Gallery A, Melbourne, exhibition catalogue

1959

Notebook

1960s

Roger Kemp

1960s

Roger Kemp

1960s

Roger Kemp

1960s

Sketchbook

1960s

Left to right, top to bottom

**Roger Kemp holding an etching plate
in George Baldessin's studio, Winfield
Building, Melbourne**

c. 1972

photograph by Rodney Lockwood

**Roger Kemp working on the
etching plate for *Relativity* in
George Baldessin's studio, Winfield
Building, Melbourne**

c. 1972

photograph by Rodney Lockwood

Roger Kemp in his Black Rock studio

1978

photograph by Richard Beck

Roger Kemp

c. 1979

**Roger Kemp with Marianne
Baillieu, Sandringham**

1980s

**Coventry Gallery, Sydney,
exhibition catalogue**

1981

Sequence 2

1970–73

synthetic polymer paint on canvas

National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne

Presented by the Kemp Trust through the
Australian Government's Cultural Gifts Program, 2014

2014.330

Untitled

1972–75

synthetic polymer paint on canvas

Collection of the Kemp Estate

Relativity

1972–74

synthetic polymer paint on composition board

Collection of the Kemp Estate

Concept

1972–74

synthetic polymer paint on canvas

Collection of the Kemp Estate

Ascending shapes

1970–76

synthetic polymer paint on canvas

Private collection, Melbourne

Sequences

In 1968 Kemp commenced a series of grand-scale works on paper and the following year began painting on large pieces of unstretched canvas. Both techniques allowed him to work more freely. With this new approach, his densely worked and often rough surfaces, such as those of his earlier paintings, opened up with a new spaciousness and airiness. His methods for applying the paint also changed: Kemp used larger brushes and even rollers to lay on washes and to work the paint across the surface.

In early 1970 Kemp travelled to London, where he stayed for almost two years. During this time he worked from a shared studio in SPACE, a large warehouse occupied by many artists on the south bank of the River Thames. For the first time since his art school days he was working in the company of others. The experience had a liberating effect and he produced some of his most ambitious works, particularly in terms of scale, during his time there. Using rolls of 1.5 metre-wide paper he could simply unroll the length he desired, pin it to the wall and begin painting. Not only did Kemp execute works on a monumental scale, his palette grew in richness.

Sequence I

1970–73

synthetic polymer paint on canvas

Collection of the Kemp Estate

Space dimension

1970–75

synthetic polymer paint on canvas

Collection of the Kemp Estate

Untitled

1974–78

synthetic polymer paint on paper

Collection of the Kemp Estate

Untitled

1970s

synthetic polymer paint on canvas

Collection of the Kemp Estate

Untitled

1974–76

synthetic polymer paint on paper on canvas

Collection of the Kemp Estate

Untitled (London suite)

c. 1971

synthetic polymer paint on paper

National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne

Presented by the Kemp Trust through the
Australian Government's Cultural Gifts Program, 2014

2014.331

Late works

Kemp continued to work in his studio and exhibit regularly throughout the 1970s, and was enjoying major success with his exhibitions. He held a number of shows in Sydney and from 1973, Marianne Baillieu, director of Realities Gallery in Melbourne, began promoting him with regular exhibitions. His 1976 show at Realities was hailed as one of the highlights of the year's cultural calendar and helped cement Kemp's wider recognition as an important Australian artist.

The late 1970s saw Kemp embrace the medium of tapestry, the result being the monumental works that now hang in the Great Hall at NGV International, on St Kilda Road. This interest in applying hand-woven, weft-faced weaving to his practice began in 1978 when he was approached by the Victorian Tapestry Workshop and invited to collaborate on a tapestry after his painting *Images*, c. 1973.

The first commission was based on Kemp's 1960–65 painting *Evolving forms* and was completed in 1984. Kemp spent time establishing a rapport with the weaving team and worked closely with them to ensure they understood his creative motivations and intentions. The remaining four commissions were completed over a period of twenty-three years and posthumously overseen by Kemp's wife Merle, and daughter Michel. The last, *Abstract structure*, was cut from the loom in 2007.

Order and balance

1974–77

synthetic polymer paint on canvas

Collection of the Kemp Estate

Space structure

1970–73

synthetic polymer paint on canvas

Collection of the Kemp Estate

Untitled

1974–78

synthetic polymer paint on paper on canvas

Collection of the Kemp Estate

Untitled

1970–75

synthetic polymer paint on canvas

Collection of the Kemp Estate

Untitled (Sequence)

1970s

synthetic polymer paint on paper on canvas

Collection of the Kemp Estate

Untitled

1972–74

synthetic polymer paint on composition board

Collection of the Kemp Estate

Untitled

c. 1970

synthetic polymer paint on paper

Collection of the Kemp Estate

Developing sequence

1980s

synthetic polymer paint on canvas

Collection of the Kemp Estate

Untitled

c. 1975

synthetic polymer paint on paper

Collection of the Kemp Estate

Configuration

1981

oil and enamel paint on canvas

National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne

Presented through The Art Foundation of Victoria
by Mrs Merle Kemp, Fellow, 1994

A12-1994

Horizontal developments

1974–75

synthetic polymer paint on paper on canvas

Collection of the Kemp Estate

Late-career renaissance

In 1980 Kemp travelled to New York with his long-time friend, sculptor Inge King. It was a short trip, just over a week, but had a full agenda that included catching up with old acquaintances and visiting many galleries. Ten days after his return to Australia, Kemp suffered a stroke that left him in a state of partial paralysis. Despite the immense effect this had on his life both physically and emotionally he was determined to return to the studio.

Kemp pushed himself physically and within months of his stroke he was painting again. To compensate for the stroke's effects he was forced to change the way he painted. To begin with, he worked in large gestural sweeps, effectively using the whole of his body to paint in order to overcome his physical limitations. It was a freer style. His figures were still identifiable within an overall structure, but in these new works they seemed to spin and float about the canvas.

In September 1981, just thirteen months after his stroke, Kemp held a solo exhibition of fifteen paintings at Coventry Gallery in Sydney. It was an extraordinary accomplishment, and his commitment and endurance were rewarded with widespread praise on the opening of the show. Kemp had achieved a remarkable recovery; in fact, he had succeeded in a late-career renaissance.

Sequence after archetype

1980s

synthetic polymer paint on canvas

Collection of the Kemp Estate