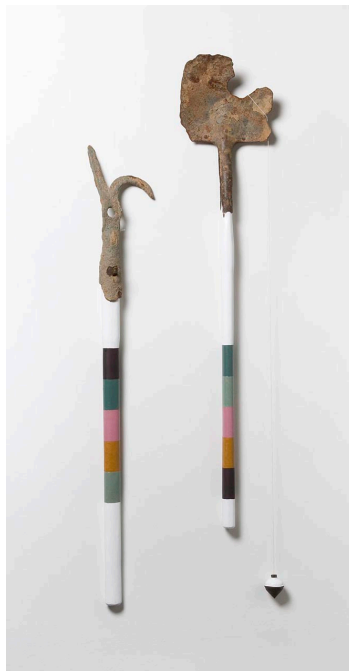


In recent years, I have found myself reinvestigating and, in a way deconstructing Sir Sidney Nolan's paintings through my sculpture. This engagement with another artist's work is important on many levels, allowing me to look backwards and forwards from the tower of Australian art history that Nolan sits. From this position I am able to explore a different set of concepts which lie somewhere between painting and sculpture, figuration and abstraction yet with a particularly Australian inflection. This essay will trace the role of Nolan's paintings in my work, and explore the idea of the contemporary, mining the art of the past. In works such as *Gang* (2013) and *Moonboy (after Nolan)* (2012) for example, I focused on archetypal Nolan motifs, while the works *Diversion* (2012), *Suntrap* (2014) and *Mrs Carroll's tent* (2014) look towards Nolan's urge to paint the Australian landscape.

The referential concerns of these works have their origins in a series I began in London in 2008 titled *Resurface* and they are reconstructed from found objects brought back from the edge of being forever lost. Whilst living in London, I worked for English painter Bridget Riley, an artist who often looks into the history of painting to re-invigorate her own works. Through this process of observation, Riley reconsiders her own early works and pursues new directions; proving the theory that much can be learnt from the missed avenues of the past.



Resurface 2008

Through her work, Riley speaks of a deep connection and dialogue with the history of painting - the Impressionists and *sensation* in particular. In her paintings she allows influences from other cultures (especially the use of colour) to be discussed – the art of the Ancient Egyptians in her stripe paintings for instance. Riley has also been able to rediscover possibilities in her work that were not earlier pursued. Her black and white painting *Tremor* (1961) and more recent wall painting *Quiver* (2013) are both works which seem to expand out beyond their 45' degree grids. Riley often creates scaffold-like compositions that begin in familiar points, but upon following a particular progression do not end up where you might expect. The effect of this sensation evokes the experience of looking at something else, like the sea or trees in full autumnal swing. For me, Riley's model confirms we should not discard our past, and in particular the depth of things we can learn from, no matter how far you go back.



Quiver 1 2013 Bridget Riley

In *Resurface 1* (2008) the rusted and broken gaff hook and shovel head were rescued from the Thames River at low tide. Visually, the objects are still able to describe their former life but would break to pieces if someone tried to use them. The possibility of turning physical disintegration into an advantage is where objects get really complex and interesting for me.

I responded to these tools as fragments of the past, but also wanted to use their patina and distortions to access a kind of reemergence of another possible interpretation. In this case, the rusted and muddy surface of the tools reminded me strangely enough of Australia - where tools are exposed to the oppressive heat - and with the right harmony of colours simply organised in a grid, I felt able to connect visually with my own history of the Australian landscape.

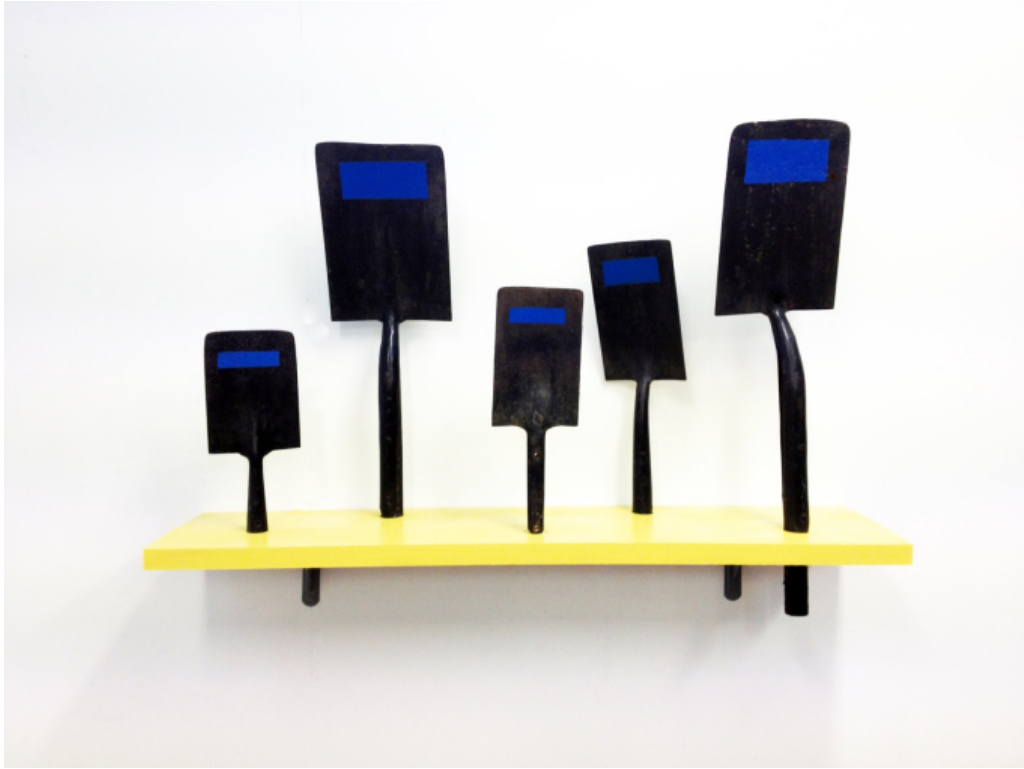
From this process of redirecting the familiar, which sits between abstraction and representation, I began to tackle the legacy of Nolan and his appreciation of Australian concepts through the everyday.

In my work, *Moonboy (after Nolan)*, I made a connection with the dual figuration of the shovelhead, at once sculpturally bust-like with a narrow neck but also as a physical extension of the figure. By adding the yellow circle the composition of Nolan's silhouette portrait *Boy and the moon* (1939) - a painting I have often seen at the National Gallery of Australia - the object sprang to life. For Nolan this painting was an early seed of reference for his Ned Kelly series and a transition towards abstraction. For me the translation of the painting's simple geometric form onto an enigmatic object, was an action which allowed me to discover another avenue of making art that maintains a tension between figuration and abstraction that is not so easily explained but intuitively recognised.



Moonboy (after Nolan) 2012

Pushing Nolan's figuration further, my work *Gang* (2013) dives right into the well-known Ned Kelly motif. These spades were collected at a rural auction and immediately reminded me of Nolan's Neds, however they needed to be contextualised. In this case, this was achieved through colour harmony; the slash of blue on the indigo-black spade controlled the figures which were fixed onto the bright yellow shelf, a gang on the horizon. By tying these simple elements together in this process, I hoped to suggest the Australian mythology and look back at the mythologised landscape by utilising a fragment of the everyday.



Gang 2014

Also tracking Nolan work but with further exploration of its themes, is the sculpture *Diversion* (2012), created from six rabbit traps hung on a horizontal grid, set-open and painted with a geometric two coloured composition. The simultaneous contrast created by situating red and blue next to each other develops a colour vibration, drawing the viewer momentarily from the brutality of the traps - a visual diversion. The sculpture is a pared back response to Nolan's 1946 painting *Hare in a trap*. Nolan's painting recalls an incident with his father where he witnessed the brutality of a rabbit struggling, locked in a trap. The bunny's eyes are strangely blue, perhaps an echo of his own, or his father's eyes, and the bright red spots of blood splattered in the foreground provide horizontal movement which intensifies as they direct the eye back to the rusted trap. For me, the work speaks not only of tension and fear, but also of being exposed and at the mercy of the elements, possibilities that I pushed further towards the Australian landscape in the work *Suntrap* (2014).



*Suntrap* was installed at the Canberra Museum and Gallery in May 2014 on an indigo-blue wall above a bright, cobalt-blue floor, the intention being to produce the effect of a floating sun or an astral body. The two and a half metre disc was composed of forty painted and rusted rabbit traps, radiating out from the center, red to orange and yellow. I organised the space with a strong horizon line like many of Nolan's paintings and installed the sculpture *Mrs Carroll's tent* on the floor in the foreground.

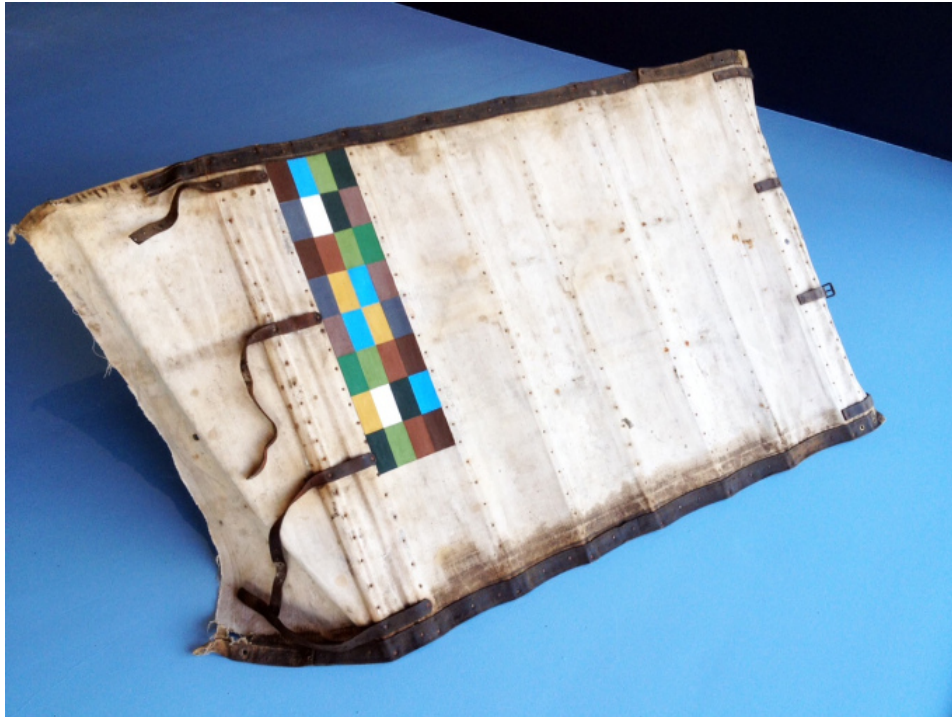


Suntrap 2014

In the collection of the Canberra Museum and Gallery is the Nolan's painting *untitled* which I used as a starting point for the work. In the painting, Mrs Carroll stands waving, or as some accounts of the work claim, shooing away the viewer. The composition of the painting is organised around the figure and her tent, which is a well-worn, beige form sitting below the horizon line. In *Mrs Carroll's tent*, I reversed the notion of the painting, placing a carefully matched geometric grid of colour, upon the surface of a tent which had been well exposed to the elements like sculpture. I collected the object from a country tip and added a makeshift structure. As a sculpture, the object was readapted from its original purpose – referencing a simple tent form and a whimsical spinning chocolate wheel, a dated yet still a popular object. As an unromantic notion of being in the landscape, Mrs Carroll is present by



her absence.



Mrs.Carrolls Tent 2014

For me, my series of Nolan remix works depart from the artist's original paintings in ways which provide new interpretations of figuration and the representations of the landscape. At a certain point, Nolan's motifs seemed exhausted or easily dismissible, especially when removed from the canvas. However, by utilising fragments of everyday objects, shaped by the elements of Australia and reinvigorated through the harmonies of colours, I am able to pursue new conceptual and sculptural directions. These artistic responses do not limit themselves as a response to another artist's voice, but instead speak of inclusion and the acceptance of influences of the past.

*Ham Darroch is a Canberra based artist. From 2006 to 2009 he lived in London and has long worked as an assistant to English painter Bridget Riley. His work [Gang](#) (2013) is included in the exhibition [Imagining Ned](#) at the Bendigo Art Gallery, 28 March–28 June 2015. Darroch is represented by Michael Reid, Sydney and Berlin. Images courtesy Rob Little (RLDI).*