Mollison's Creation

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Pauline Green (ed.)
BUILDING THE COLLECTION
National Gallery of Australia, $69pb, 416pp, 0 642 54202 3

ROBERT HUGHES, bemoaning the contents of the Art
Gallery of New South Wales in 1959, cast an eye over
its sandstone façade decorated in bronze letters with
such august names as Rubens, Titian and Raphael, and
quipped: 'Never has so large a nut housed so inadequate a
kernel.' The National Gallery of Australia was in every respect
the opposite story: its collection was a fat kernel in search
of a shell. Until 1968 this collection, thought to comprise
some 3000 works, was strung around Canberra offices and
Australian embassies like so much washing on a line. The
Commonwealth Art Advisory Board, which
would soon be dismantled, had been buy-
ing energetically, if conservatively, for years.
However, there was no catalogue, no conservator to care for them and no estab-
lished policy for the collection.

Enter James Mollison, who arrived in
Canberra that year as an exhibitions officer,
and left it as a highly respected, if contro-
versial, director in 1989. Mollison found him-
self with a surprisingly generous budget
and a brief to travel. The art world tom-toms
beat furiously. 'I'm not the man with all the
money,' Elwyn Lynn, another peripatetic
curator, was obliged to disabuse the hope-
ful New York dealers.

Mollison's ultimate appointment, after
an exhausting game of international musical
chairs, carries an interesting message. To-
day, directors are required to have a kite-tail of paper creden-
tials after their names. Occasionally, the grander the CV, the
graver the disappointment. Undaunted by criticism,
undistracted by carping, Mollison vigorously pursued works
of exceptional quality (both international and local) and in all
media. By 1974 he had assembled a dazzling and representa-
tive collection of Australian and international art, which would
could be argued that it should no more be interfered with than
the paintings hanging on the wall.

The gallery opened in 1982, with much ceremony. There
were customary effusions, visionary sermonising and, behind
the scenes, exhaustion. The story of Blue Poles needs no
retelling here. The publicity gave Canberra a tourist lure com-
parable to Sydney’s Opera House. Expatriate art dealer Max
Hutchinson, who brokered the deal, once said, 'They should
give me a medal.' In Hutchinson’s obituary, The New York
Times made rather too much of the role of Blue Poles in the
demise of the Whitlam government, stating that this expendi-
ture, which required a vote by parliament, created a storm of
protest and editorials in the Australian newspapers and
'brought down the government'.

Building the Collection, a handsome and detailed vol-
ume, traces the National Gallery of Australia’s efflorescence
through the forest of officialdom. Appropriately, it begins
with an interview with Mollison and ends with a flourish from
its current director, Brian Kennedy. In be-
tween, it proceeds as a kind of memoir, with
a cast of characters — curators, council
members and others — contributing a fo-
rensic cross-hatching of memories and
events to its years of collecting, displaying
and stoushing. There are some factual over-
laps as various curators recall the glory days,
but this is mere carping.

In a democratic impulse, as much atten-
paid is given to the cast of characters (and
they are legion) as to the actual works in
all their diversity. Facts and figures are
 garnished with flesh and blood, essential for
the visceral tale of a gallery. The chapters
touch on most corners of the collection,
although it is a pity to see Australian con-
temporary jewellery, with which the National
Gallery is well endowed, overlooked.

The years of director Betty Churcher’s tenure (1990–97)
were, as she notes, mostly associated with significant interna-
tional exhibitions. Their very presence was a testimony to the
high regard in which the gallery was held in international
circles, and for the quality of its permanent collection.

The book finishes on a candid note — or rather candid
graph — which illustrates the number of gallery gifts and
purchases between 1945 and 2002. In 1974, a year of great
optimism in the cultural community, 9421 gifts rained down on
a gallery that was yet to be built. And the gifts are still flowing.
While the government has increased the gallery’s funding
from $22.4 million in 1997–98 to $35.8 million in 2002–03, some
members of the Gallery Council have dug deeply into their
own pockets (this publication is coy about figures) to assist
with the purchase of works Kennedy has set his excitable
heart on.