

returning to a subject through a lifetime:

part one

## Temporarily Unavailable

In late 2021, Broken Hill City Art Gallery staff approached Broken Hill-based artist Hannah Bertram to commission an artwork for the re-opening of the Gallery. As the Collection became temporarily unavailable to the public, the work was to investigate the Sully's Emporium as an architectural archive responsible for housing and framing the Collection.

While the building was undergoing renovations, an opportunity presented itself to BHCAG staff to review and question the historic and future roles of the City's Collection. We reflected upon the very idea of what the Collection represents, and the frameworks of value used to acquire, care for, and conserve particular objects.

The nationally significant BHCAG Collection examples the interwoven histories of Broken Hill and Far West NSW: the mining industry's close ties to the beginnings of the Collection; visual representations of the significant role of Broken Hill in national social and labour movements; ancestral stories of Wilyakali and Barkindji Country; the nurturing of regional arts culture for more than 100 years; and the commitment to stories of environmental destruction and regeneration. It is from this starting point that the exhibition is interested in how curatorship can re-animate archives and disrupt dominant historical narratives through processes of recontextualising.

Bertram's resulting commission is a monumental installation titled *Temporarily Unavailable*. Produced over a six-month period, Bertram drew from the Sully's building as central to the research, development, and material of the work. In inviting an artist to create site-responsive work, investigating material, form, and context must precede any potential outcome.

The installation repurposes materials collected from the site during the renovations – old and new floorboards, plastic used to wrap and protect artworks, detritus found when floorboards were lifted, and various dusts, both new and settled in the building over decades of occupation. The materials are formed into a series of platforms partially obscured by a veil of plastic and detailed with patterns of fine dust. Bertram does not merely take the building or Collection as subject matter, but rather turns each element into a collaborator, acting as a translator for the memories held within.



Image: Public gathering in Museum, c. 1908-1911. Photographer, James Wooler. Courtesy Broken Hill Outback Archives, 90/1/3945  
Sketch: Hannah Bertram, Preparatory Sketches, 2022

Audiences are invited to engage with the work from many angles, first from ground level, hazy and ambiguous, and then from above, revealing complexity and clarity.

As discussed in Bertram's essay to be published by *fine print* in June 2022, "The artworks displayed and archived [in the Collection] have been gathered because a community deems them to be of value. However, like our own accumulation of items in our homes, over time we can care a little less and become careless with them.... This movement between care and carelessness speaks to my interest in the ambiguity of value. What we seek to collect and preserve because it's important to us and equally what we discard because it is no longer useful or significant, is subjective and will change. A shift occurs in our perception of them from worthy to worthless. When I work with dust, I apply this process in reverse by transforming worthless material into something precious."

Presented alongside Bertram's installation is W. R. Thomas, *Broken Hill mines, Mount Gipps and Kinchega Runs, county of Yancowinna – 1885* (1885); Harriette Sutcliffe, *After the Bath* (1890); Arthur Streeton, *St Mark's Domes, Venice* (1908); Madonna Staunton, *Untitled assemblage of mineral sample packets* (1979); and William (Badger) Bates, *Marnpi Dreaming (The bronze-winged pigeon story)* (1994). Bringing these five works into a relationship with each other, the exhibition tells the story of the Collection's shifting focus, exposing the complexities of its management, maintenance, and display.

Bringing together seemingly incompatible Collection works alongside Bertram's commission, *returning to a subject through a lifetime: part one* demonstrates how a community's relationship to a collection of objects shifts over time as the terms of cultural heritage are negotiated and re-negotiated. This exhibition lays the foundation for enquiry and is a prologue to *part two* of the exhibition which will investigate artistic practice and process in Far West NSW, opening 8 July 2022.

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# Our Dusty Inheritance

## *The Cultural-Ecology of Collection Care*

Dan Schulz

Just as a politician may cut a ribbon or turn a sod of dirt to inaugurate a new project, the Broken Hill City Art Gallery has commissioned an installation artwork to mark the passing of time and to consecrate the newly renovated Sully's Emporium building. The artwork by Hannah Bertram is titled *Temporarily Unavailable* and is a prologue to the forthcoming Collection exhibition which will open in July.

Bertram's installation uses the dust accumulated over nearly two decades of the Council's occupation of the Sully's building, as well as the discarded floorboards and industrial plastic used to protect the Gallery's Collection during the renovation. Bertram's practice includes site-specific installations and performances that use the everyday materials of dust and debris to highlight the constant of change. For Bertram, dust is a metaphor for the ceaselessness of time. "Dust is the only constant in the universe," she explains, "It is constantly gathering and migrating and transforming. It can never be fixed. It shows you that time has passed, so in a way, it reveals the nature of time, but the material itself has always existed and will be there at the end of everything."

Dust is not inert. Everyone has battled with the tyranny of its constant home invasions; we've wiped it from old photographs; choked on it in cluttered sheds; copped a face full of it in a storm; it has darkened our skies and poisoned our bodies. In the early days of settlement, Broken Hill's only energy source was timber which led to intensive land-clearing. This, along with the prospectors' excavation of the underground, created the unstable soils of our dusty inheritance. This dust contains high levels of organic compounds due to eroded agricultural land, and is rich in aluminium, silicon and iron oxides, making Broken Hill's environment uniquely challenging to the preservation of art. Dust devalues artworks. It attracts moisture which can cause cracking and mold, and it invites flies and insects, whose acidic discharge can damage a painting's surface. Broken Hill's dust is more abrasive than your generic household dust with mineral oxides and large particles that are like airborne sandpaper, slowly eroding surfaces over time.

Bertram's installation highlights the architectural problems of housing the nationally significant art collection, valued at close to \$10 million, in a 133-year-old building. The Sully's building, home to the Broken Hill City Art Gallery since 2004, was the earliest established and longest surviving commercial business in Broken Hill until its closure in 1985. It was designed to be a spacious, well-lit warehouse for the display, supply and storage of the many products needed to support the mining town. Upon the completion of the Walter Sully Warehouse in 1889, the *Silver Age* reported that "Broken Hill has gone through changes in a few years which border on the magical... Three years ago our town was composed of a few wooden sheds... there is nothing that so clearly indicates the progress of a town as the erection of substantial stone and brick buildings." The Sully's building remains an Argent Street icon, preserving the urban vision of the commercial entrepreneurs who led the economic development of Broken Hill and in the shift from wooden shanty buildings to architecturally designed stonework, transitioned Broken Hill from a shambolic mining camp into a vibrant city.

The recent renovations of the Sully's building address many of the challenges to housing the Collection in a heritage building. When it comes to the conservation of art, prevention is key. To mitigate the manifestation of dust, the old crannied floorboards have been replaced, and deteriorating walls have been repaired; basement repairs will reduce moisture and rising damp from under the foundations; and a new roof and modern humidity and temperature control units have been installed to create a controlled climate and protect the Gallery's 2000 plus collection of artworks.

As part of *returning to a subject through a lifetime: part one*, Melbourne conservators Robyn Ho and Eleanor Vallier of Care Of Studios, performed the cleaning of Arthur Streeton's 1908 painting, *St Mark's Domes, Venice* on the opening night of the exhibition. The Streeton painting has been on show for over 10 years in the Sully's building and has collected the unavoidable rufescent hue of Broken Hill's landscape. The conservators examined the painting and isolated the dirt layer, tailoring the solvents to the specific chemistry of Broken Hill's dust. Using specialist vacuums, sponges, and brushes they revived the image of the painting, demonstrating publicly the practice of caring for the Collection. The performance invites discussion about which artworks we choose to conserve and which we allow to fade into history. Asking the questions, what artworks should get priority treatment? And what management practices best balance collections care with public engagement? These are difficult and complex processes which must consider the economic, historical, and cultural significance of a work, whilst balancing this with popular demands and fostering public awareness of the versatility and breadth of the Collection. As a regional gallery, these deliberations are made even more prohibitive by budgetary limitations, lack of staff resources and access to expertise.

Alongside Bertram's installation and Streeton's painting are four additional Collection works which provide a cross-section of the many interpretations of Broken Hill's heritage. The watercolour painting by W. R. Thomas is the earliest known artwork depicting the settler township of Broken Hill. It is a survey of the mining leases, established when Charles Rasp discovered the enormous orebody of the Barrier Ranges in 1885. George McCulloch was the station manager of the property where the discovery was made, and he formed part of what is known as the Syndicate of Seven. McCulloch became extremely wealthy from mining activities and in 1904 he founded Broken Hill's art collection when he gifted three oil paintings, 28 engravings and artist proof sketches, to the Broken Hill City Council to be managed on behalf of its citizens. These initial works were hung in the 'museum room' at the Broken Hill Technical College and Museum where the collection remained until the early-1970s. Exhibited in conversation with W. R. Thomas' watercolour is one of the original three oil paintings donated to the city by McCulloch, *After the bath* (1890) by Harriet Sutcliffe.

Harriette Sutcliffe was a British painter and a regular exhibitor at the Royal Academy. Up until the 1920's, it was commonplace for Australian art collectors to preference acquisitions of European artists. The interwar period saw an emerging nationalist sentiment challenge the notion that European artistic culture should inform Australia's appreciation of art. Reflecting this shift, the Collection's caretakers at the Broken Hill Technical College voiced their views that the Collection should include more works by Australian artists. Proceeding decades saw the Collection acquire historically important Australian artists such as Arthur Streeton, Margaret Preston, Hans Heysen and Frederick McCubbin. These shifts highlight the reshaping of the Collection through time. Broken Hill's cultural development has long been actioned through its relationship to education, contributing to the discursive practices which shape and reshape the content, meaning and direction of the Collection.

Since its founding, BHCAG's Collection has absorbed shifts in artistic movements and diversified its cultural heritage in response to changing ideas, allowing for acquisition practices to reflect the various cultural, social, and political differences of Broken Hill residents. Notable local examples include the acquisition of the 1980s painters, collectively known as the 'Brushmen of The Bush', as well as the acquisition of many local First Nations artists in the 1990s. These recent acquisitions have contributed to the Gallery's inclusion of the unique cultural perspective and identity of Wilyakali and Barkindji artists.

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Representative of these important acquisition practices is the lino print, *Marnpi Dreaming (The bronze-winged pigeon story)* (1994) by senior Barkindji artist William (Badger) Bates. This work tells the story of the bronze-winged pigeon and the formation of The Pinnacles; containing the rich deposits of zinc, lead and silver which compose Broken Hill's mineral wealth. Including this print in the exhibition acknowledges the ancestral story of Wilyakali Country and demonstrates the Australian paradox of wealth and contamination, where mining and agricultural activities have destroyed places sacred to First Nations people, and disrupted cultural practices associated with those places. In conversation with Bates' lino print is Madonna Staunton's *Untitled assemblage of mineral sample packets* (1979), a collage of mineral samples which provides a tactile representation of this process: transforming sacred land into fungible commodities.

These five artworks alongside Bertram's installation provide an insight into the complex and multifaceted nature of Broken Hill's Collection: its storied legacy, impressive scope, and the environmental challenges of its management. *returning to a subject through a lifetime: part one* suggests that collections are not inanimate, lifeless objects to be banked as representations of a bygone era. They are living entities around which notions of heritage are contested, architectural spaces are reclaimed, and culture is practiced. Collections, like dust, are constantly gathering and transforming. They prompt us to reflect upon what we choose to value, preserve, and remember; and what we allow to be annulled by the corrosivity of time.

Dan Schulz is a Broken Hill resident, filmmaker, and video artist with a background in architectural design. He is currently undertaking a PhD which investigates the consequences of water resource management on the cultural ecology of the Darling-Barka River.

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