

# Bold Enigmas

Works from the Sidney Myer Fund Permanent Collection



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B63D

Artist: Bill Griffiths (*Untitled*) 1971 oil pastel and poster paint 370 x 560mm



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# Bold Enigmas

**Mysterious and compelling, the works in *Bold Enigmas* deal with familiar themes in unexpected ways.**

The exhibition evokes the elusive nature of intuitive expression, yet also points to the purposeful internal logic of the artists, each with their own distinctive visual style. Collected from special schools, day centres and institutions for people with an intellectual disability around Victoria, these works provided the inspiration and basis from which Arts Project Australia has grown over more than 30 years.

When the founders of Arts Project Australia (APA) set out in the mid 1970s to assemble works for an exhibition of art by people with an intellectual disability, they could not have foreseen the long-term significance of their efforts. According to Myra Hilgendorf OAM, founder of APA

*When these paintings and drawings were collected ...the impact of so many fresh, original and highly expressive works was so startling, it was apparent that they deserved much more consideration.*

Such a response to the aesthetic qualities of the works was in sharp contrast to the prevailing approaches of the time, which tended to see art by people with an intellectual disability in diagnostic or therapeutic terms, not as art in its own right.

Excited by the discovery of such a rich and unrecognised manifestation of human creativity, Myra and her colleagues, Kitty Ginter and Dr. Cliff Judge, sought advice and assistance from some of Victoria's most eminent art historians, curators, administrators and academics including people such as Patrick McCaughey, Erica McGilchrist, James Mollison and Gordon Thomson. Here they found support which confirmed their confidence in the artistic merit of the works, and fuelled their conviction that they deserved to be presented in a professional manner in recognised art galleries. This resulted in two seminal touring exhibitions *Minus/Plus* (1975) and *Tommy's World* (1980).

*Bold Enigmas* contains many rarely seen works from these exhibitions. The body of 400 or so works originally collected, and from which these exhibitions were drawn, is now known as the Sidney Myer Fund Permanent Collection in recognition of support from the Sidney Myer Fund in 1989 which allowed for improved documentation and storage. The Permanent Collection consists mostly of works on paper many of which are fragile and in urgent need of conservation treatment. However, if it were not for the sensitive appreciation and fearless drive of the founders of APA it is unlikely they would have survived at all. They would be lost forever, discarded as eccentric doodlings by people for whom the potential to contribute to society was then simply unrecognised.

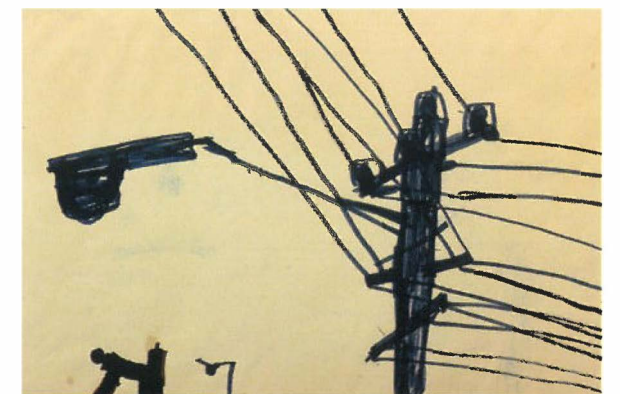
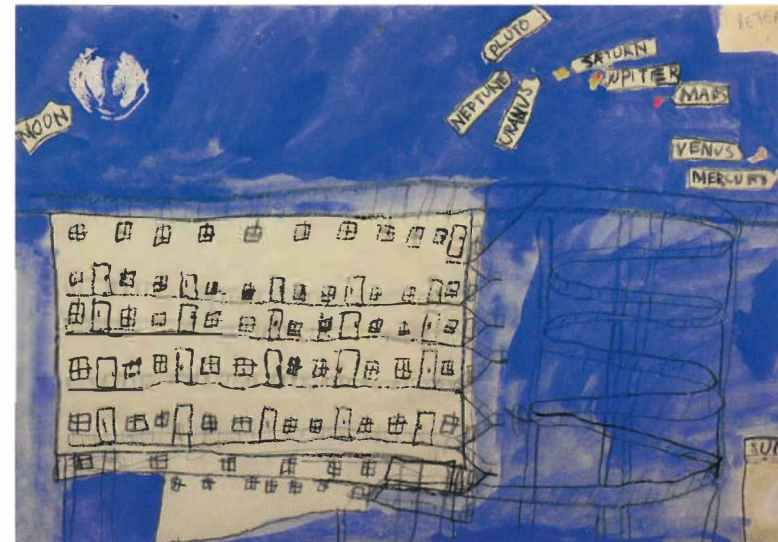
The works included in *Bold Enigmas* have been selected for the singularity of each artist's idiom. The impact of these works has not diminished with time. David Coles' enigmatic figure drawings are infused with energy and mystery, often surrounded by insect-like forms in which can be discerned the alphabetical letter 'D,' thought to be the artist's signature. Tommy Risler's remarkably cool, confident, linear observations of his environment demonstrate an uncanny ability to use perspective to create a strong sense of scale and distance. Shirley Warke's delightfully colourful and patterned images form a personal visual lexicon which she employs to describe a series of playful scenarios. Bill Griffiths' works depict a variety of vehicles, furniture and buildings stripped back to the essential elements and occupying prime position in uninhabited spaces. These are pictures of real and imagined worlds, perhaps created as an escape from what might have been restrictive and unstimulating environments.

Little is known about the creators of these works: some of these artists were institutionalised, but others lived with caring families. It is not my intention to dwell on their backgrounds as to do so risks detracting from the aesthetic import of the works. However, when considering the historical context of these pictures, their content and circumstance of execution, it is difficult not to take into account the limited opportunities open to people with

an intellectual disability in the early the mid 1970s when these works were collected. The movement towards de-institutionalisation and the right of people with a disability to live as other citizens was still in its fledgling stages in Australia. The stigma associated with intellectual disability meant that in many cases it was forbidden by the authorities for the artists' surnames to be displayed with the works or in written documentation. Most of these works were created using poor quality materials which have deteriorated with the passing of time. It was with a desire to rectify this situation that the APA studio began in 1984.

*Bold Enigmas* captures glimpses of individual worlds and ways of seeing. The creators of these works did not regard themselves as artists but were nonetheless driven to engage in intense visual expression. There is a sense of urgency in many of these works, a drive to record experience through repetition and symbolic imagery reminiscent of hieroglyphs, maps, and figurative markers. We are indebted to these artists for providing such a rich and enduring legacy, a source of lasting wonder and inspiration.

**Dr. Cheryl Daye**  
March 2008



Clockwise from top left: Artist: Paul [Puffing Billy] felt tip pen 335 x 540mm, Artist: David Coles [Untitled] c1975 ballpoint pen 300 x 220mm, Artist: Bill Griffiths [Caravan] c1970 oil pastel & poster paint 380 x 560mm, Artist: Bill Griffiths [Volkswagen] c1970 oil pastel & poster paint 380 x 560mm

Clockwise from above: Artist: Peter [Planets and Building] c1974 pencil & poster paint 370 x 565mm  
Artist: Tommy Risler [Power lines] c1970 felt tip pen 455 x 615mm  
Artist: Don Young [Easter and Flying Buses] 1980 poster paint 510 x 750mm



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 Arts Project Australia is an incorporated association and a recognised charity

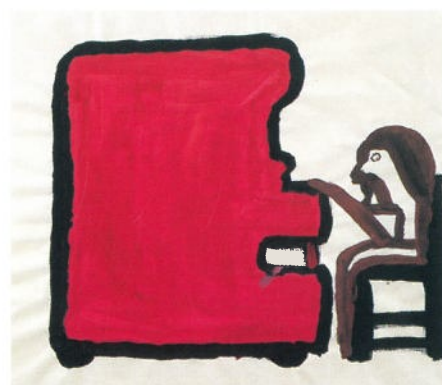
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Clockwise from top left: Artist: Peter J (*Man*) 1971 pencil & poster paint 390 x 560mm, Artist: Shirley Warke (*Untitled*) crayon 215 x 310mm, Artist: Brian (*Pianist*) poster paint 375 x 450mm, Artist: Bill Griffiths (*Shrine*) oil pastel & poster paint 385 x 560mm