

## Katherine Hattam: Art is in the blood

Natalie Thomas, artist and writer

I love when someone you know turns up unexpectedly in a book you're reading and you learn about a part of their life you didn't know about. And what you learn of your friend is sweet, filled with other artists and the messy business of creating art, which is essentially making something out of nothing. And the book that your friend is in isn't an airport trash novel, it's a learned text, one of those books you devour quickly but stays in your brain days after you've turned the last page. A book you need to dissect and underline because there's stuff there you will use and make reference to, so you don't forget.

I learned from Patrick McCaughey's memoir, *The bright shapes and the true names* that Katherine Hattam enjoyed an enviable childhood, growing up in a classic nineteenth-century house in South Yarra. The household was filled with art and artists, the family's impressive collection drawing art aficionados aplenty to their address. Fred Williams was a regular guest. As McCaughey describes, in Katherine's family:

argument was a way of life for them. The large sitting room would frequently have two or three conversations going on simultaneously. [Katherine's parents] Kate and Hal had the slightly disconcerting quality of engaging you in conversation at the same time but on different topics. They loved reflecting on the play of personality on event.<sup>1</sup>

I met Katherine Hattam through art, the pursuit of which we have each fashioned our lives around. Katherine and I speak together about revisionist feminist histories and the refocusing of attention on the work of overlooked and under-exhibited female artists. How the reputation of one generation of artists is largely held in the hands and mouths of the succeeding one. We wonder why work by female artists is still valued less than work made by male artists. We talk about how men assume the role of the artist while women must fight to continue our careers. We consider what society used to look like for women back in the day, compared to what it looks like now. We celebrate advancements, and grieve the glaringly obvious areas in which gender equity has thus far been denied.

Learning more about Katherine's childhood made me reflect again on the idea of artistic inspiration, and where it comes from. What feeds our creative desire to make something new?

We see answers in the work of Katherine Hattam. Art is everywhere. It is in family and friendships, it is in the words we speak, read and write, art is in the relationships with partners we share our lives with and the children we rear, it is in the tv we watch, and the food we eat. Like her parents, art is in Katherine's home, she has immersed her life in it. It's embedded within her family life.

I started making large-scale drawings at sixteen but went to university, not art school. My first show was at Melbourne Uni, where I exhibited alongside Helen Frankenthaler in the George Paton Gallery, run by Kiffy Rubbo and Meredith Rogers. That was in 1978 and since then my career has woven through three children, two marriages and life. I could say my career is just getting started now, though I've exhibited pretty much every year since 1978. I didn't plan on being an artist, it just crept up on me—though I thought of and did plan to go to gallery school, later called the VCA, but my parents strongly dissuaded me—as they knew lots of artists and saw how tough that life could be. Also I was academic and enjoyed studying, reading and writing essays and exams.<sup>2</sup>

Much of the art of Katherine Hattam begins with the book. Having inherited her widely read mother—Kate's—book collection, Katherine slices and dices out meaning, collaging pages onto canvas and painting in, round and over the text, leaving flickers and remnants of meaning for her audience to decipher. We're reminded how quickly stories can be lost if we let them be lost. Works in this exhibition include intriguing snippets from *Three plays for puritans*, *The catcher in the rye* and *Descend into the maelstrom*, all of which emerge from behind lavishly applied layers of paint, sometimes stripped back again, sometimes not. The words capture and focus the viewer's attention, building on our experience of and reception to these well-known texts.

Precisely chosen words by writers often convey their thinking so poignantly that others pay tribute to them—like Katherine—even cutting them up and using them as the background for a painting. Because that's what artists do, we study, learn and gravitate towards fellow artists who speak the same language as us. Artists have a shared desire to make something that unravels some of our life experience and hopefully, after a good day in the studio, offers meaning for others too.

Katherine's personal history is also referred to in this exhibition—a phone number from days gone by that can't be forgotten, the sequence of letters and numbers stamping themselves deep into her sub-conscious. Katherine lists her artistic influences in the My Pantheon series of works, a 'shout out' to women artists whose work has inspired her own: Margaret Preston, Grace Cossington Smith, Dorrit Black, Clarice Beckett, Queenie McKenzie, Grace Crowley, Rosalie Gascoigne, Stella Bowen, Emily Kame Kngwarreye and Joy Hester.

What role does history play in our lives? Who is telling the story and who is 'owning' history? The desire to paint, draw, watch, read and fiddle each day, seeing the life of an artist as a vocation costing 'not less than everything', that is the life of Katherine Hattam and it is a life well lived.

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1. Patrick McCaughey, *The bright shapes and the true names: a memoir*, Text Publishing, Melbourne, 2003, p. 98
2. Katherine Hattam in conversation with the author, 9 March 2019