

Micky Allan

THE ACCA EXPERIMENTS: MICKY ALLAN – FOR LOVE OF THE DIVINE

BIOGRAPHY

Born in Melbourne, April 1, 1944. Sister, three years older.

1946-50

Lived in Japan. Father, who was in the Army and a patent-attorney before the war, posted to Japan, Tokyo, to examine inventions established during the Second World War. Micky Allan went to the International school for children of European and American personnel posted in Japan.

1950-62

Family returned to Melbourne. Attended Christchurch Primary School, South Yarra, then Melbourne Church of England Girls' Grammar School, Merton Hall, South Yarra, from where she matriculated and was School Captain. Won an American Field Service Scholarship, and attended a small girls school in Kansas City, Kansas, July 1961 – June 1962. First exhibition of paintings in national art contest for high school students, four of the seventeen paintings she entered in final selection. School held her first solo show in May 1962.

1965-67

Bachelor of Arts, University of Melbourne. Studied Philosophy as well as Fine Arts under Joseph Burke, first Herald Professor of Fine Arts. Two years full-time study then finished the course part-time. In 1965, commenced full-time Diploma of Painting course (three years) at the National Gallery School (now the Victorian College of the Arts), with teachers Ian Armstrong, Marc Clark and John Brack, who was particularly influential in showing her that it was possible to make a life as an artist. She was conscious that there were no female artist role models to follow. Taught art at Footscray Central State School.

1968

May, married artist Rod Withers, in a final year of Art course. Entered a painting, based on a photograph, called *Fireworks*, 1968, oil on canvas, in the National Gallery School Travelling Scholarship, which was won by Ric Amor.

1969

Head of Art Department, Penleigh Presbyterian Ladies' College, Melbourne.

1970

First trip overseas, with Rod Withers. Followed the "hippie trail": car to Queensland, bus to Darwin, plane to Portuguese Timor, Indonesian Timor, Bali, Kabul, Djakarta, Calcutta, Assam, Darjeeling/Istanbul, and by train to London. Most affected by the balance she found

amongst Tibetans, between the harshness of their life and the gentle humour which permeated their approach to it. In India, at the holy city of Benares, saw corpses of women burnt on the pyre in magenta, men in blue, and began to think of and use colour in more significant terms.

At Istanbul, she was deeply impressed by Santa Sophia, its huge space "throbbing with the presence of early Christianity", the sense of everything being connected, of mosaics built up from little pieces. Liked the combination of elegant craft work with the "ruddiness of the first impulse", in contrast to the refinement of the Blue Mosque. During this period, she was assessing different religions, while mistrusting all dogma.

Lived in London, in Holland Park, for six months, by "supply teaching", three days a week. Went to Paris for one weekend. Not interested in seeing Europe at this stage, since she found Asian culture more interesting. Flying back to Australia over India, she was impressed by the continuous stream of lights below, indicating the density of population, as opposed to the occasional clusters of lights flying over Australia.

1971-75

Began full-time position at University of Melbourne as assistant curator of Visual Aids, in the Fine Arts Department. She and husband separated. Began to work at the Pram Factory, designing sets, costumes and posters for four performances, and was a member of a feminist collective. Then took photographs of the performances.

January 1972, the Australian Performing Group and Carlton Women's Lib. first Australian all-female production of Kerry Dwyer's *Betty Can Jump*, included a series of slides taken by Micky Allan. The production ran for six weeks and was seen by 5,000 people.

During 1972-73, she was working part-time only in the Fine Arts department, while continuing to work at the Pram Factory. Other productions on which she later worked included *Sonia's Knee and Thigh Show* and *Mary Shelley and the Monsters* with Evelyn Krape and Bruce Spence.

1974

Part-time tutor in art at Preston Institute of Technology (now Phillip Institute), headed by Brian Seidel. Living at 55 King Street, Melbourne with Laurel Frank, a member of the Popeye Puppets which became Circus Oz, Jane Clifton, and Virginia Coventry, who taught Micky Allan how to process photographs. Started to take photographs. By this time, she had stopped working at the Pram Factory but held her first show of black and white photographs there. Hand-painted a series of posters for the production *Mary Shelley and the Monsters* and then began to hand-colour her photographs because "it seemed the obvious thing to

do". She had not seen any hand-painted photographs, since she was not part of the photographic world, and had no notion of the "pure print". At the same time, she was taking photographs for *The Digger* magazine, along with Ponch Hawkes, most notably, issue number 36, 1974 and number 45, 1975.

1975

Special Project Grant from the Visual Arts Board of the Australia Council to record people in and out of performance for a proposed publication on theatre performance, a way of documenting the Pram Factory productions. These photographs would be included in her first solo exhibition, *The Live-In Show* in May 1978.

In August, 1975, Sue Ford organised an exhibition *Three Women Photographers* at the Ewing and George Paton Galleries, University of Melbourne, under the directorship of Kiffy Carter (nee Rubbo). Micky Allan showed the first contemporary, exhibited hand-coloured photographs in Australia, entitled *Laurel* (of Laurel Frank), along with work by Sue Ford and Virginia Coventry. Maureen Gilchrist, reviewing the show in *The Age* referred to Micky Allan as "the real find in this exhibition" (18 August 1975).

Another project was a film on abortion, scripted by a female collective, which was never completed. Began to take the photographs which provided the material for *My Trip*.

1976

Took photographs of Pram performances at night and generally learnt the mechanics of photography. Moved to Newry Street, Carlton, opposite the Yooralla Society and took photographs of children leaving the school at 20 past 5 one afternoon, which were later hand-painted in Sydney.

Exhibited *My Trip* at the Experimental Art Foundation, Adelaide, in *A Survey of Post-Object Art in Australia*. Other artists included John Davis, Bonita Ely, Sue Ford, Richard Larter, John Lethbridge, Mike Parr and Imants Tillers.

June-July. Exhibited series of seven photographs, hand-coloured with pencil, of *Babies* in two exhibitions, *Drawing: some definitions*, organised by artist Domenico De Clario, at the Ewing and George Paton Galleries, Melbourne; and *Three Photographers*, with Sue Ford and Ashe Venn, at Abraxas, Canberra. *Babies* acquired by James Mollison for the Australian National Gallery.

1977

Moved to Sydney, principally to pursue more individual work as opposed to the collective approach of the time. She also wanted to start painting again. Felt that she had to leave Melbourne and the whole way of life there to do this. Began to work on material for her first solo show, namely the *Old Age* painted photographs, the Gladioli drawings and performance photographs.

Joined the *Lean Sisters*, a group of eight to ten women espousing "anarchic feminism" who performed at the University of Sydney Art Workshop ("Tin Sheds"). Other members included Pamela Brown, Jo Burns, Kay Self.

1978

May, first solo exhibition, *The Live-In Show*, an installation/performance, at the Ewing and George Paton Galleries, Melbourne, and later in July at the Watters Gallery in Sydney. The Show was described as "an adventurous exposure of the self" in a review by Memory Holloway for *The Age*, 6 June; and the *Old Age* portraits are felt to have "enormous emotional power" by Sandra McGrath in the *Australian*, 22/23 July. Patrick White bought the series of forty *Old Age* portraits and gave them to the Art Gallery of New South Wales.

Christine Godden, newly appointed director of the Australian Centre for Photography, Sydney, recommended Micky Allan to CSR for the CSR Photography Project for Pymont Refinery Centenary. Her eighteen black and white prints were exhibited, along with the work of five other photographers, at the Stock Exchange, Sydney, the Pymont Refinery, then at the Australian Centre for Photography.

1979

Began work on *The Prime of Life* series, twelve portraits coloured with watercolour, pencil and gouache, for Alison Carroll's exhibition *Drawn and Quartered*, Australian Contemporary Paperworks, at the Art Gallery of South Australia in March 1980. In the catalogue, Micky Allan described the process: "I define an age groups, 28 to 42, based partly on the age cycles according to traditional Chinese medicine. I take the photos...I place the photo on the desk...The person on the page looks at me. I look at them. I feel poised; intent but passive. I begin. This is the part I like most. At no stage of the photographic process is the contact so direct."

Artist-in-residence at the University of Sydney Art Workshop. Ran workshops on hand-coloured photography and in October organized the *Hand-Coloured Photo Show* at the Tin Sheds.

Jennie Boddington, Curator of Photography at the National Gallery of Victoria, commissioned *Botany Bay Today*, a series of thirty-six photographs, for exhibition in July 1980 with Jillian Gibb's *One Year's Work*.

August-September. *Landscapes and People on the Edges of Landscapes. Link Show*, at the Art Gallery of South Australia, organised by Ian North. This was the first of a proposed series of three groups of hand-coloured photographs taken from 1976-79, during trips around Victoria and southern New South Wales. She was already working on the second group, of northern New South Wales and southern Queensland, which would be exhibited as *Travelogue* in July 1980 at Watters Gallery.

1980-87

Moved to the Blue Mountains, Mountain Lagoon, and continued to teach photography part-time at the Tin Sheds. Lived in the country for a year. Jim Sharman, who had seen the *Live-In Show*, commissioned some photographs for the Adelaide Festival of Arts in 1982, in the Rotunda, Elder Park, with sculptures by Mark Thompson outside the pavilion.

June-July, *Survey 2, On Paper*, by curator Robert Lindsay at the National Gallery of Victoria, included Micky Allan's *Babies*, *Old Age* and *Prime of Life* with works by Mandy Martin, Sally Robinson and Jenny Watson.

1981

Moved to Adelaide, Parkside, and commenced a lecturing position in photography at the South Australian College of Arts, where she remained until the end of 1982.

1982

July-August, *Project 38, Re-constructed Vision, Contemporary Work with Photography*, by curator Gael Newton, at the Art Gallery of New South Wales, included Micky Allan's *Twenty past Three* photographs, hand-coloured with watercolour and gouache. *Cat and Mouse* series of four hand-coloured photographs joint winner, with Kay Lawrence, of the Maude Vizard-Wholohan Art Purchase Prize, at the Art Gallery of South Australia.

Commissioned by the City of Elizabeth, with four other South Australian photographers, to reveal "the inner character of our city and its people". This series of portraits, exhibited as *Portrait of Elizabeth* was the last photographic work she would undertake.

March, *The Family Room*, a series of fourteen full-length portraits, of the artist's family, formed the interior of *The Pavilion of Death, Dreams and Desire*, in Elder Park, as part of the Adelaide Festival of Arts. These were described as "portraits that trace the changes age brings; changes in expectation, attitude, appearance and desire".

Trip to Central Australia, Alice Springs and Ayers Rock. Began a series of charcoal drawings which will be exhibited with *The Family Room* in Sydney at the Watters Gallery in February 1985. These drawings herald the transition to painting.

Knowing that Micky Allan was about to give up photography, Jennie Boddington at the National Gallery of Victoria, commissioned a series of twelve portraits which were drawn from the *Portrait of Elizabeth* negatives of 1982.

1985

January, departed Australia for Vence in the South of France, to take up residence in the Australian studio at the Michael Karolyi Foundation for six months.

Father died a few weeks after her arrival there.

Impressed by the pastel-toned light and the sensuousness of the fertile landscape, Micky Allan started working on the pastels and collages that would be exhibited as *Songs from the South of France* at the Watters Gallery, Sydney in 1984.

March, trip to Barcelona with friends, where she was impressed by the quality of colour and Gaudi's architecture. Visited the island of Formentera, off the coast of Spain and returned to Vence via Valencia. Enjoyed the freedom from photography and the freedom to explore an imaginary world in paint. These discoveries influenced her later paintings.

Later, she missed the conceptual aspects which had underscored her photographic work.

Travelled by train to Florence and Venice. Much affected by the Baptistery in Florence, the huge space, the abstracted sculpture and the ceiling, the severity of the space between all these, the beauty of detail and the complex simplicity of the whole.

Returned to Vence and moved into a farmhouse for three months.

November, returned to Melbourne. Lived in Rathdowne Street, North Carlton. Completed a series of abstract collages, begun at Vence and to some extent, influenced by Matisse's late collages and his interior for the Vence Chapel.

1984

Teacher in the post-graduate Diploma of Art course at the Victorian College of the Arts. Worked part-time at Studio Set constructions executing set designs for such television productions as *Sale of the Century*. Her first job there was to reproduce in paint a large ice crystal. The experience taught her that anything could be painted, and allowed her to develop a range of technical skills, as well as a feel for working to a large-scale format. Awarded Visual Arts Board grant for residency at the Power Institute Studio, Cite Internationale des Arts, Paris.

November, departed Melbourne for Paris. Began a series of pastels initially based on the Seine, above and below the river, represented by *Fete de Pont Neuf*, which she had first thought of doing at Vence. Savoured the experience of being in Europe, drawing on the cultural heritage.

Trip to Naples which was influential in forming the body of work, later exhibited as *Travels Without My Aunt*. Lived for two weeks in a hotel overlooking the Bay of Naples, views of which she drew at night from her hotel window, resulting in *Flaming Pearl over the Bay of Naples*. Struck by the Baroque nature of the city, the "glitter" of the place, the continuous rhythm of the life, and the integration of the sky, sea and streets. Visited Pompeii, the island of Capri and Herculaneum. Villa of Mysteries and Pompeian frescoes were influential, especially a small fresco of Egyptian figures. Again, she was impressed by the combination of parts within a large space.

1985

April, two week trip to Tunisia at the end of her residence in Paris, resulting in the painting, *Tunisia*. Drew the Armenian buildings and was impressed by the abstract, geometric designs of the mosaics, an experience which would lead to her interest in the maze form. Visited Milan and the Visual Arts Board Besozzo Studio on her way back to Paris.

May, flew to New York from Amsterdam, and stayed there for two weeks in the East Village, resulting in the painting *New York*. Returned to Melbourne and finished the works begun in Paris which were exhibited in November as *Travels Without my Aunt*, at 200 Gertrude Street, Brunswick. Focussed on combining a sense of the past with some sense of the future, seeking a "seamless connection" between the real and imaginary, thought and intuition, the abstract and the real, science and art. The exhibition was not reviewed in Melbourne or Sydney.

1986

February, moved to Eildon Court, St Kilda, and felt settled for the first time. Impressed by the skylines of St Kilda and Melbourne.

Australian Centre for Contemporary Art

Began working in a large studio in Brunswick Street, Fitzroy and began to paint larger works which were influenced by her reading of a book on the weather, *Heaven's Breath, A Natural History of the Wind*, by Lyall Watson (London, 1984). Sea images and creatures were combined with sky motifs and biomorphic forms, such as computerized molecules, diagrams of interstellar gases and ice crystals, drawn from a variety of references, including *Scientific American*, which had been pre-empted by *Seti I*, from the *Travels* series.

She considered the concentration on the sea/sky to be an extension of her earlier photographic work, such as Botany Bay, as well as being encouraged by living in St Kilda. These works were exhibited at United Artists Gallery in St Kilda in November 1986 and included large dark paintings, unified by scale and motif, as well as a series of pastel drawings.

Trip to Norfolk Island with friends at Christmas. Took underwater photographs with a view to using the material in her next series of paintings, as well as photographs of the sky.

1987

February, moved to Barkly Street, North Fitzroy. Began to work full-time on a series of large paintings later entitled, *Near and Far, Now and Then* which were developed partly out of her Norfolk Island photographic work.

These paintings drew on early Christian and tantric symbols, mythological and alchemical references, diagrams of radiation explosion, of the Kruskai-Szekeres space-time model, Descartes' view of vision, Newton's sketches of prism experiments and intergalactic space delayed echoes. She sought a balance between the geometric and formal properties of the paintings and the literal, descriptive symbols of religious principles.

Alice Bailey's *Treatise on Cosmic Fire*, (New York, 1925) a theosophical text, was a reference. Wanted to "ground" the paintings in the sky and make large-scale pictures which retained the sensation of the small, and described "the point where opposites collapse".

September, *Micky Allan Perspective 1975 - 1987*, a twelve year survey of her drawings, photographs and paintings, organised by and held at the Monash University Gallery. Included paintings from the series, *Near and Far, Now and Then*, as well as her most recent drawings on glassine paper, used for its transparency. The exhibition consolidated for her a sense of beginning and a new sense of scale.

November, group show at the University of Melbourne's Ormond College organised by its artist-in-residence, Tony Clark who invited artists to respond to the college site and buildings. Allan's small painting of a building was installed on the clocktower outside so that it changed with the weather and appeared quite abstract, like a small gold square, from the ground.

1988

February, Solo exhibition, Watters Gallery, Sydney.
November, Solo exhibition, *Places in Space*, City Gallery, Melbourne.

Short trip to coastal area of Coffs Harbour, New South Wales, travelling up the Newell Highway to

Coonabaraban.

Began design on tram as part of the *Transporting Art* programme, sponsored by the Victorian Ministry for the Arts and the Met.

Moved to studio in Glenhuntly Road, Elsternwick and house in Caulfield.

Christmas, second trip to India for three weeks. Visited Agra, Madras and Delhi. Took photographs of the landscape behind the Taj Mahal which for her was a continuation of the building in that both the land and the air seemed to exude the same palpable presence as the building. A detailed drawing of this landscape would be included in exhibitions in 1989. She believes the trip fundamentally shifted the whole tone of her work.

Selected for inclusion in the Bicentennial portfolio of prints by Roger Butler, curator of 20th century prints, Australian National Gallery.

1989

Resumed part-time lecturer's position at the Victorian College for the Arts and Prahran Department of Art, Victoria College.

Began working with Melbourne artist, Aleks Danko, on a combined exhibition entitled *Harvest*, proposed for Watters Gallery, Sydney, in 1990.

July-August, executed her design for tram No 724 in white paint with gold, silver, blue and emerald car enamel. The design was to have included in 18ft neon lights, five 5 point white stars on one side of the roof, with five abstract symbols on the other side including a blue spiral and circle, a pink heart and, within each other, three red rectangles and two yellow triangles. This part of the design was not able to be realised in the final execution which included images of a large white whale, a white rose, a gold triangle, a red tulip, Newton's diagram of light through a prism, a giant radio telescope and, representing the people of Melbourne, footballers and swimmers. She enjoyed the large-scale working and the fact that people would walk into the space she had created.

December, installation at the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, entitled *For Love of the Divine*, consisting of three spaces. This project provided her with the opportunity to create a sense of huge space in small areas instead of describing detailed moments within a large area such as she had pursued in her previous large paintings. The installation consists of an interplay between floor to ceiling drawings (in white pastel and charcoal) with various textures - drafting paper, recycled paper, white wrapping paper and walls covered with panels of white silk taffeta.

A booklet by Christina Davidson entitled, *Transfigurations*, is produced in conjunction with the installation.

Revised and updated version of "Biography", *Micky Allan Perspective 1975-1987*, exhibition catalogue, Monash University Gallery, Sept. 1987.

This exhibition is sponsored by the Victorian Health Promotion Foundation. ACCA is assisted by the Victorian Ministry for the Arts and the Visual Arts/Craft Board of the Australia Council.

Compiled by Jenepher Duncan, exhibition curator, *Micky Allan Perspective 1975 - 1987*.

Based on interviews with Micky Allan 16/4/87 and 5/11/89.

