The Art Gallery
of Western Australia

Attachment Styles
Modes of Belonging in Modern and Contemporary Art

Artwork Labels

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Introduction

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Wall text:

Attachment Styles: Modes of Belonging in Modern and Contemporary Art

In this State Art Collection display, works from the 19th to the 21st century demonstrate how artists have articulated the connections and disconnections between individuals, communities and the environments they inhabit. To make this explicit, the display draws on the language of attachment styles: anxious, avoidant, disorganised and secure. These concepts offer a way to understand how artworks reflect, dramatise and complicate the ways we relate to each other and with the world around us.

The idea that individuals possess or exhibit distinct attachment styles originates in the work of English psychiatrist and psychotherapist John Bowlby (1907–1991) and American-Canadian developmental psychotherapist Mary Ainsworth (1913–1999). Developed from the 1950s, their research mapped the emotional and behavioural patterns that formed in our earliest relationships and, by extension, shape the ways we love, withdraw, idealise, defend and connect throughout our lives.

Although consistently relevant to mental health professionals since its inception, over the past decade attachment theory has leapt from applications in formal

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therapeutic contexts to popular culture. Social media especially is now saturated with reels, memes and quizzes that map our behaviours—ghosting, breadcrumbing, love bombing, negging, cuffing, to name a few—onto the anxious, avoidant, disorganised and secure styles of attaching.

In what might be seen as a ‘global group therapy’ session, podcasters, influencers, musicians, filmmakers and writers merge self-help with social commentary to offer well-meaning advice or sassy hot takes ‘for entertainment purposes only’. By distilling complex dating and relational dynamics into digestible, relatable terms they guide, challenge or humorously commiserate with us as we navigate the difficulties of existing, potential and ex-relationships.

When viewed through this popular lens, modern and contemporary art offers a rich field for considering how emotional states and relational dynamics shape artistic expression. Artists have long created works that illuminate the practices, effects and ideologies of relation: as they reflect on the others with whom they find ourselves variously entangled—socially, erotically, politically, spatially, economically and ecologically—and theirselves whose coherence is often more imagined than stable.

The works in this display depict a range of attachments: be it the romantic conventions modeled in genre

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paintings that subtly inform our expectations of desire and intimacy, love and lust; the intricacies of family life wherein children and parents idealise, demonise, misunderstand or cling to one another; or the spectral projections that gesture towards relationships before they've even begun. States of loneliness and alienation also appear as examples of moments in which bonds have shattered yet hope persists. Across many works, situations arise whereby games are played, tactics enacted and strategies employed to ward off rejection or disappointment which constitute the structure for a particular kind of living. Further works point to collective attachments, especially the social and political bonds that shaped life in this country, including the specific modes of living here that made settler colonial occupation materially and psychologically possible.

Given the complexity of art as a many layered, sometimes elusive process and language, the attachment styles visible in these works are rarely clear-cut and never one-dimensional. Like people, artworks contain contradictions: basic styles blend and morph into conglomerate styles that propose fresh modes of relating with the world and the irritating, baffling and occasionally endearing humans within it. While some labels may foreground a specific attachment style, we encourage you to consider what other styles might equally apply.

Wall text:

About Attachment Styles and Attachment Theory

Seeing the world through the common attachment categories of anxious, avoidant, disorganised and secure can seem overly reductive, yet their simplicity offers a tool for orientating ourselves amidst the destabilising relational scenarios shaped by AI, dating apps and social media. These various technological filters infiltrate most, if not all, of our social networks to produce continuously shifting, and often conflicting, streams of advice, warning, admonition and bathetic inspiration. In this climate, attachment styles provide a language, however imperfect, through which to make sense of our relationships.

Attachment theory is based on the idea that a sense of security in early childhood is critical to the development of healthy relationships and social functioning later in life. A secure attachment develops when a caregiver provides a workable balance between meeting a child's needs and supporting them to tolerate the frustration of occasionally unmet needs. So called 'disorders' of an entwined social and psychological nature occur when caregivers 'fail' (often with good reason) to accompany children through this journey to the establishment of a comparatively comfortable selfhood where one can depend on oneself and others in an easy enough manner.

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Later in life we might exhibit behavioural characteristics resulting from the attachments we experienced early in life. For instance, if we could not rely on the presence and interest of a caregiver we might become overly self-reliant in order to protect ourselves (avoidant) or we might be described as needy and require constant reassurance (anxious). Conversely, when there was no pattern legible to how the caregivers related, and perhaps it was erratically varying, a child might develop a disorganised attachment that is as confusing to them as it is to people around them.

As with all psychological models the principles behind attachment theory are neither uncontested nor without complications. For instance, Bowlby's book *The Making and Breaking of Affectional Bonds* (1979) linked the ability of American astronauts to function well as a team to the presence of stable father figures who instilled in them a spirit of self-reliance, disciplined composure and trust in authority. By contrast, nervy neuroticism with its doubting, inwardly overthinking worrisome edge, was considered unhelpful in the workforce and, if we extrapolate, un-patriotic. The rationalistically imperial agenda of the Cold War space program is not usefully supported by overly emotional types squabbling with their colleagues and bursting into tears at every opportunity.

Ainsworth's famous 1969 *Strange Situation* experiment explored how attachments function between mothers and children. In a controlled play scenario, a mother

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and child interact alone, then with a stranger who briefly replaces the mother, before the pair are reunited. The reactions Ainsworth observed indicated to her that there appears to be an *ideal* middle ground of behaviour whereby the child exhibits only *mild* anxiety followed by the natural acceptance of comfort upon the mother's return. This behaviour was thought to signal a better chance of the child relating independently and successfully with others as an adult. For her, indicators of a secure attachment style might include being able to hold down a job or remain married. In line with the normative aspects of Bowlby above, such framings inevitably raise the question of whether the ideal of a 'secure attachment' also describes a desirable social citizen who is emotionally regulated, cooperative and never a 'burden' to others. This logic can, of course, be playfully inverted. Perhaps the child in the experiment is already negotiating: sensing the mother's needs, modulating their reactions to maintain care and performing the required role in order to survive. This speculative reversal points to a sense that attachment is arguably always negotiated in relation to power, economic dependence and desire.

For these reasons, we can discern the possibility of attachment styles being weaponised as punitive descriptors that reinforce problematic political ambitions and social norms. Beyond this, and more generally, the aim of better 'regulating' emotions and behaviours in order to more securely fit into predetermined social

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frames might simultaneously offer benefits to an individual and function as a form of social control. Having noted that, it needs to be stressed that in therapeutic settings great care is taken to avoid any rigid or de-individualising interpretations of patient and client behaviour. Rather, attachment-informed insights might be used to open nuanced questions about the challenges of certain connections that support a more complex understanding of an individual's selfhood and relational capacity. Such awareness is often less apparent in pop culture and the unadjudicated realm of social media. However, the simplicity of attachment styles offers accessible guidance in an era marked by digital noise and emotional uncertainty. Their clarity provides a counterbalance to contemporary relational instability, even as the complexities beneath them remain far richer than any 'content piece' can convey.

Davida Allen

born 1951 Bidjara/Charleville, Queensland
lives Meanjin/Brisbane, Queensland

Dog, baby and Davida

1981
oil on canvas

Purchased 1981 1981/0P11

Bernard Hall

born 1859 Liverpool, England
moved to Naarm/Melbourne, Victoria 1892
returned to London, England 1932
died 1935 London, England

Studio interior

c1923
oil on canvas

Gift of Joseph Brown Gallery, 1978 1978/00P8

Francesco Vinea

born 1845 Forlì, Italy
lived Florence, Italy 1860s–1877; London, England 1877–1882; Paris, France 1880s–1890s
returned to Florence, Italy 1890s
died 1902 Florence, Italy

Love Under the Rose

1889
oil on wood panel

Purchased 1911 1911/00P1

Rupert Bunny

born 1864 Naarm/Melbourne, Victoria
lived Naarm/Melbourne, Victoria; Paris, France 1887–1890; London, England 1890–1894; Paris, France 1894–1914
returned to Naarm/Melbourne, Victoria 1914
died 1947 Naarm/Melbourne, Victoria

Idleness

c1909
oil on canvas

Gift of Sir J Winthrop Hackett, 1911 1911/00P3

Sydney Long

born 1871 Burbong/Goulburn, New South Wales
lived Warrang/Sydney, New South Wales, 1871–1900; London, England 1900–1904; Warrang/Sydney, New South Wales 1904–1939
returned to London, England 1939
died 1955 London, England

Bush Idyll

1908
oil on canvas

Purchased 1972 1972/00P5

Arthur Boyd

born 1920 Naarm/Melbourne, Victoria
lived Naarm/Melbourne, Victoria; Bundanon/Bundanoon, New South Wales 1948–1970s
returned to Naarm/Melbourne, Victoria 1970s
died 1999 Naarm/Melbourne, Victoria

Lovers and dog

1962
oil on canvas

Gift of Dr Jo Lagerberg, 2005 2005/0078

Marion Borgelt

born 1954 Nhill, Victoria
lived Naarm/Melbourne, Victoria
moved to Warrang/Sydney, New South Wales 1977

Untitled

1983
oil on linen canvas

Purchased 1983 1983/0P15

Saskia Leek

born 1970 Christchurch,
Aotearoa/New Zealand
lives Tāmaki Makaurau/Auckland, Aotearoa/New Zealand

Lets not move

2008
oil on board

Purchased 2009 2009/0031

Is your lover out of reach, unresponsive or in trouble? Are you protesting by calling multiple times or trying to provoke jealousy to pull them closer? Getting attached means becoming wired to seek the support of our partner by ensuring their psychological and physical proximity. Most people are only as ‘needy’ as their unmet needs.

Dependency is paradoxical. If I find the swell of love too overwhelming, then, as I turn to chart a new course, my ship’s hull drags you into its wake. You and I are equally swept away by the same currents, the same tides of longing and retreat. Each of us afraid that the force of these emotions will capsize our hard-won sense of singularity, and so we must maintain contact with each other at all costs. Lets not move.

Robert Bagge Scott

born 1849 Norwich England
died 1925 Norwich, England

Good luck and farewell

1904
oil on canvas

Purchased 1906 1906/00P3

Bagge Scott, a painter and long-time president of the Norfolk & Norwich Art Circle, was known for his landscapes and marine scenes that reveal a profound attachment to the waterways of late nineteenth century England.

In this seascape, Bagge Scott portrays ships departing as the sailors' wives wave them goodbye. The evocative title and atmospheric sky reflect the uncertainty of parting, and in doing so, invite reflection beyond the visual. Just as one cannot know the outcome of a voyage, one cannot build a relationship on potential alone. You can only build it on what is actually present. The painting mirrors this truth: the sailors leave, their fates unknown, and one must ask, can you accept the relationship as it is, with its limits, and still find fulfillment? Or does your longing for intimacy compel you to say, like the sailors' wives, good luck and farewell? Both choices are valid but you must be honest with yourself about what you need.

Harold Knight

born 1874 Nottingham, England
lived Nottingham, London, Newlyn, Cornwall, Colwall, England
died 1961 Colwall, England

Mistress and maid

c1927
oil on canvas

Purchased with funds from the Hackett Bequest Fund, 1928 1928/00P7

This painting presents a psychologically charged scene of quiet domesticity. Knight, a painter attuned to subtle emotional registers, often depicted women in states of contemplation, absorption or unspoken tension. Here, the spatial and relational dynamic between the two women—one absorbed and one attending—hints at parallel inner worlds.

Painted in the late 1920s, a moment when social roles for women were shifting but still constrained, the work captures the ambivalence of longing for a life beyond one's prescribed position. In this light, the painting resonates with the idea that the erotic is essential in the pursuit of a more expansive self. Just as the mistress departs through the doorway so too can the erotic become a portal to feeling alive when the familiar feels limiting.

Hugh Ramsay

born 1877 Glasgow, Scotland
moved to Naarm/Melbourne, Victoria 1880s
lived Paris, France and London, England 1901–1906
died 1906 Naarm/Melbourne, Victoria

Welcome news

1899
oil on canvas

Gift of Mrs J. Wicking, 1950 1950/00P3

Tonally restrained and unerringly perceptive, Ramsay constructs a scene in which feeling unfolds not through dramatic action but through the quiet tension of four bodies in close proximity. For the young woman, who is eagerly awaiting the arrival of favourable news, the letter registers the imagined return of an absent other. Yet the seated women's close scrutiny introduces a counterpoint to romantic anticipation. Her posture conveys concern, perhaps even anxiety, rooted in the practicalities of family life. By contrast, the young woman leans forward with unconcealed hope, her expression open to whatever future the letter might promise. The man, seated slightly apart, observes the unfolding exchange seemingly aware of the emotional currents circulating within the room, yet remaining marginal to them.

The letter, whose contents remain hidden from the viewer, becomes less a message than a vessel for the absent other. It returns the beloved to mind by inserting

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his presence into the picture while paradoxically registering his absence. Viewed through the lens of attachment, the painting unfolds as a study of how language mediates relationships. The letter is at once blank and expressive. It is a surface for projection that sustains a romantic fantasy and a trigger that awakens yearning or sharpens worry.

David Strachan

born 1919 Salisbury, England
moved to Tarntanya/Adelaide, South Australia 1920
lived Creswick, Victoria 1921; London, England and Paris, France 1936–1938; Naarm/Melbourne, Victoria 1938–1941; Warrang/Sydney, New South Wales 1941–1948; Europe 1948–1960
died 1970 Warrang/Sydney, New South Wales

Adam and Eve

c1970
oil on hardboard

Gift of Mrs R Rowan, ACT, 1974 1974/00P9

In Strachan's painting the 'couple', Adam and Eve, appear to lean on each other as equals, maybe matched in their attachment styles. However, their dynamic will change when Eve reveals a more adventurous and inquisitive sensibility that trumps Adam's insecure caution. Both will then be abandoned by their notional parent, God, and cast out of Eden.

The iconic figures who will soon be separated from God can also be read as emblematic of the human quest for selfhood and transformation. Just as the original tale depicts the first act of crossing boundaries, Eve reaching for the fruit against the admonishment of Adam's anxious style, modern interpretations of desire suggest that affairs are not simply betrayals of others, as they search for a better partner but often seek their *own* lost potential.

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Poised between intimacy and separation, Strachan's figures suggest the quiet negotiations and unspoken longings that underpin human attachments. In this way, the symbolic fall might be understood not solely as an act of betrayal but as an attempt to rewrite a personal narrative, to reclaim parts of the self that feel invisible, trapped or constrained.

Jeffrey Smart

born 1921 Tarntanya/Adelaide, South Australia
served in the Royal Australian Air Force during World War II 1941–1945
lived Paris, France 1946–1948; Rome and Florence, Italy 1949–1952
moved to Arezzo, Italy 1971
died 2013 Arezzo, Italy

Hide and seek

1962
oil on plywood

Purchased 1964 1964/00P6

Smart is known for his paintings of unnaturally still and sparsely populated urban environments. The hushed setting he has created in this painting conveys a sense of ‘ordinary mysteriousness’ that encourages us to focus on how childhood games imaginatively exist in another world. It is a realm in which there’s the possibility of figuring out, or processing, who we are and how we relate to others. In this work, therefore, we see not simply an example of differing attachment styles (avoidants who hide and insecure types who seek) but how they are dependently entwined; they need each other to be who they are. We would expect that as part of the game, the pair will change roles and try out a different attachment style, and possibly gain some tacit self-knowledge and understanding about how it might feel to be like another.

Jenny Watson

born 1951 Naarm/Melbourne, Victoria
moved to Meanjin/Brisbane, Queensland 1990s

Reflection in a muddy puddle

2013
oil and mixed media on linen

Purchased through The Art Gallery of Western Australia Foundation: TomorrowFund, 2014, with the generous donations of: Linda Savage, Susan Adler, Lisa Baker, Tracy Blake, Karen Brown, Catherine Cole, Susan Cullen, Elaine Featherby, Lisa Fini, Alison Gaines, Kathleen Hardie, Anne Holt, Gillian Johnson, Carmen La Cava, Heather Lyons, Joanne Motteram, Susan Pass, Lisa Telford, Clare Thompson

2014/0070

Watson often uses herself as her own ‘anti-heroine’ in her paintings. In this self portait, she acts out a kind of abjected narcissism, mesmerised by her reflection in a muddy puddle. Narcissism is a big concept in pop culture now, especially its malginant varieties where it can seem as if everyone’s ex is a narcissist. Watson’s work is clearly not of this projective nature, but instead offers a space for those with ‘bad’ self concepts to find in them creative possibilities. Imbuing this position with a poetic empathy, she depicts an attachment to the self that sits outside normative exemplars and their frameworks of pressured flourishing.

Stewart MacFarlane

born 1953 Tarntanya/Adelaide, Australia
moved to nipaluna/Hobart, Tasmania 1990s

The boarder

1987
oil on cotton duck

Gift of ICI Australia Ltd, 1995 1995/0252

It's kicking off! Envy seems to be in play or maybe a payback is happening. Either way, it's what we're used to seeing as 'acting out'. The title implies that there is an underlying imbalance of power that has set the scene in motion. The status of being a boarder is insecure, because one doesn't really belong. This opens up a range of questions about the economic basis of our capacity to feel secure and the need to locate any understanding of someone's behavioural characteristics in a social context. A question for this moment might be how the housing crisis is impacting the vulnerable, as they are typically the most exposed to shifts in living standards.

Joy Hester

born 1920 Naarm/Melbourne, Victoria
died 1960 Naarm/Melbourne, Victoria

Mad girl

c1942–1943
oil on metal

Purchased through the Sir Claude Hotchin Art Foundation, The Art Gallery of Western Australia Foundation, 2013 2013/0075

Hester's short but tumultuous life offers a lens through which to read the young woman at the centre of this painting. Born into a middle-class Melbourne family whose stability rapidly disintegrated after her father's early death, she grew up navigating the fraught demands of a controlling mother. These formative dynamics of care, entwined with anxiety, echo throughout her work.

The cultural figure of the 'mad girl' stands at the threshold of emotional ambivalence. Her heightened intensity resonates with attachment styles formed when love is inconsistent or conditional. Hester's mad girl registers the tension of a psyche attempting to master an old pain by reaching toward what is both desired and feared.

Mad girl is the 'flawed' character whose emotional intensity may seem excessive or irrational. Yet it is an equally valid response to an ongoing experience of powerlessness. The expression she carries is not simply 'madness' but a restlessness familiar to those whose

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emotional realities have been dismissed or pathologised. While it is dangerous to carry unprocessed trauma into our relationships, many people have been ‘gaslit’ into madness by the persistent refutation of their experience. The feelings expressed in this work are sharpened by a long cultural history in which female insight is mistaken for excess and protest misinterpreted as mental illness.

In this staunch female figure Hester affirms fidelity to body and mind. This is no romanticisation of female suffering but an assertation of our obligation not to undermine each other’s sense of reality for the sake of convenience. Read this way, ‘madness’ becomes a misrecognition. Her irrational gaze expresses the impossibility of reconciling hope with what experience has taught her.

Emanuel Phillips Fox

born 1865 Naarm/Melbourne, Victoria
lived Naarm/Melbourne, Victoria; Paris, France 1887–1896
returned to Naarm/Melbourne, Victoria 1896
died 1915 Naarm/Melbourne, Victoria

Love Me, Love Me Not

c1909
oil on canvas

Gift of Sir J. Winthrop Hackett, 1910 1910/00P3

In seeking pleasure, we find ourselves subsumed by images of desire. Our thoughts, our feelings, our interests can be aroused by the other's body, but in order to ensure we are not overwhelmingly alone in this fugue, enflamed state we must first be certain of the desired being's returned interest. To find pleasure we must look for signs: he loves me, he loves me not. Yet these signs must also never in fact satisfy us; for desire to retain its generative force, we must accept the impossible: that our relationships can only properly play out in an unsettling space of reaching out and reaching in.

Every great love remains a quest.

James Carse

born 1819 Edinburgh, Scotland
moved to Tarntanya/Adelaide, South Australia 1867
lived Tarntanya/Adelaide, South Australia; Victoria (mainly Naarm/Melbourne); moved to Warrang/Sydney, New South Wales c1875
died 1900 Warrang/Sydney, New South Wales

The Punt, Echuca

1869
oil on canvas laid down on hardboard

Gift of A J Jones, 1948 1948/0P11

This scene of nineteenth century trade might ask us to consider the relative security or insecurity of economic relationships in capitalist societies. Amongst other qualities, value in such economies is based on scarcity; where there is little of a good it costs us more to acquire it. Many would argue that the ‘scarcity mindset’ of capitalism creates cultivates anxious attachments in most of its subjects.

Sally Marsland

born 1969 Mount Beauty, Victoria
lives Naarm/Melbourne, Victoria

why are you like this and not like that?

2004
epoxy resin, polyurethane resin, English Ash, powder-coated tin can, wooden bowl, paint

Purchased through the Peter Fogarty Design Collection Fund, The Art Gallery of Western Australia Foundation, 2008 2008/0004.a-h

Criticising a partner, fantasising about better options and feeling that the grass is always greener are often a defence against vulnerability rather than evidence of a bad relationship. When we focus on what our partner lacks, we protect ourselves from confronting our own fears of dependence, dissappointment and of choosing ‘wrong’. Fantasising about a perfect elsewhere spares us from staying with the messy, ordinary reality of love.

David McDiarmid

born 1952 nipaluna/Hobart, Tasmania
died 1995 Warrang/Sydney, New South Wales

Rainbow Aphorisms

1994
computer generated print on paper

Gift of John McBride AM under the Commonwealth Government's Cultural Gifts program, 2017
2017/0026.a-h

McDiarmid's text works such as this *Rainbow Aphorism* series explored the impact of AIDS on himself and his friends and peers. Sharp, direct and incredibly nuanced, these prints honour the robust and politically oriented attachments underpinning relationships in the gay community at the time; McDiarmid's works refuse to stigmatise people living with HIV and advocate for the importance of attachments that do not fit into the dominant heterosexual order.

Machiel Botman

born 1955 Vogelenzang, The Netherlands
lived Paris, France
lives Haarlem, The Netherlands

Untitled [paper house in hand]

c1995
silver gelatin print

Gift of Max Pam, 2004 2004/0223

Even if we are securely attached and perfectly independent, there are likely times when we yearn to return to a state or a time, when we are fully taken care of by another.

Russell Drysdale

born 1912 Bognor Regis, England
moved to Naarm/Melbourne, Victoria 1923
lived London, England and Paris, France 1938
returned to Naarm/Melbourne, Victoria 1939
lived Warrang/Sydney, New South Wales 1940; Gosford, New South Wales c1966
died 1981 Warrang/Sydney, New South Wales

The gatekeeper's wife

1965
oil on canvas

Purchased 1965 1965/00P5

On social media the term gatekeeping refers to people who don't want to share insider knowledge about the finer things in life: the location of a restaraunt, the brand of jeans they're wearing, the breeder of their Italian greyhounds. Gatekeepers will teasingly offer glimpses of their lifestyles while keeping their attachment to their goods and experiences secure...always ahead of the boring, conforming masses. For this kind of attachment, there's no point having something if you can't prevent others from having it. Such are the pleasures we might imagine the unseen husband in this painting enjoying; it'd be made all the more sweet because he knows we know about them and will never attain them. Still, something else might be going on; his wife and daughter might be such relaxed guardians of his *Driza-bone* hipsterism because they are wryly aware that they control the source of his cultural power and could subvert it anytime by letting everyone in on his secrets.

Juan Davila

born 1946, Santiago, Chile
moved to Naarm/Melbourne, Victoria 1974

Gulf

1983-1986
oil on canvas

Purchased 1991 1991/0017.a-d

Davila's *Gulf* references the British artist Allen Jones' famous sculpture *Table*, 1969 that features a female figure on all fours with a glass top. With the larger legs hovering above the scrubbing figure on all fours, Davila sets up questions about domination, subordination and the uneven distribution of labour between the sexes in patriarchal cultures. The Gulf logo is a reference to the American oil company, the headquarters of which was once located in the tallest building in Pittsburg. Its pyramid-topped structure was surpassed in 1970 and in the early 1980s the company was the subject of a hostile corporate merger by a smaller company. Connecting sexual and corporate politics, *Gulf* suggests that the more secure we feel in our attachments the more insecure we may be; it is also a warning that the ways we symbolise our material and symbolic attachments can negatively impact on others. Making the work more complex, though, is a hint that there may be a perverse attachment to being dominated in certain ways.

Arthur Streeton

born 1867 Mount Duneed, Victoria
lived Warrang/Sydney, New South Wales; Naarm/Melbourne, Victoria; visited Cairo, Egypt 1897; lived London, England 1897–1919; Somme Region, France (WWI official war artist) 1918
returned to Naarm/Melbourne, Victoria 1920
died 1943 Olinda, Victoria

The hillside

1895
oil on panel

Purchased with funds from the Geoffrey William Robinson Bequest Fund, 1990 1990/0237

Streeton was one of a key group of Australian artists at the end of the nineteenth century who were inspired by the French Impressionists to start painting outdoors and to render, with a relatively direct immediacy, the atmopsheric nuances of particular places. In this work he creates a zone of tranquility. A working farm that is also one of relaxation and aesthetic reverie. A place where the anxious attachments of early colonial life can be put aside within a newly harmonious whole. Works such as this saw Streeton lauded for revealing a kind of ‘essence’ of Australia. This nationalistic spirit would be returned to again and again in this country’s cultural life with the claims that, at last, there was a truly national vision, one not ‘imported’ from elsewhere. It is ironic that most of the key players of this movement sought recognition in London for these achievements, thus also linking the easy security depicted in such works to a tremulous, conflicted and insecure attachment to the standards of the mother (country).

Frederick McCubbin

born 1855 Naarm/Melbourne, Victoria
lived Naarm/Melbourne, Victoria
visited London, England; Fontainebleau, Paris and Versailles, France 1907
died 1917 Naarm/Melbourne, Victoria

Down on his luck

1889
oil on canvas

Purchased 1896 1896/00P7

McCubbin painted *Down on his luck* in the past tense. As a history painting, it can be seen as a kind of mourning for a mode of life that is either over or on the way out: that of the itinerant farm worker and mining prospector. In this nostalgic retrospect, the reality of economic failure is softened and sealed in its recent past where it is transformed into the status of a myth. Such emotionally inflected stories of colonial Australia acted as secure points of attachment to provide a cultural buffer against the challenges of the coming modern age. It would be easier to face these, and complexity in general, with the ground of a shared take on a past. In this way, we are parented by our cultural icons; naturally, we may have the same attachment problems with them as we do our actual parents, finding their examples either suffocating, enlivening, inappropriately exasperating or, indeed, all of these together.

Frederick McCubbin

born 1855 Naarm/Melbourne, Victoria
lived Naarm/Melbourne, Victoria
visited London, England; Fontainebleau, Paris and Versailles, France 1907
died 1917 Naarm/Melbourne, Victoria

Moyes Bay, Beaumaris

1887
oil on canvas

Purchased with funds from the Great Australian Paintings Appeal with funds presented by the Swan Brewery Company Ltd, 1978 1978/00P9

A watchful parent interested in the activity of the child while allowing them a degree of independence is considered to support a secure attachment style. This painting might be seen to foreground the various political complexities of this ideal. The boy's play indicates how he may aspire to leave the mother for the masculine world of boats and greater adventure. The safety she provides encourages confidence and imaginative engagement with the wider world that might lead to empathy with others and the creation of structures capable of unsettling the colonial order, though within the culture of the time such impulses may have been orientated toward its consolidation.

Samuel Fisher

born 1859 London, England
lived London, England; Paris, France 1881–1883; Venice, Italy 1883–1898
returned to London, England 1898
died 1939 London, England

The Tambour Frame

1899
oil on canvas

Purchased 1899 1899/00P2

The making of a tambour frame for many women in Victorian England was a way in which skills and connections were established between mothers and daughters. Its construction necesitiates close teamwork and the intimate exchange of knowledge passed through generations. Fisher captures this interlacing of hands, labour and affection, highlighting the domestic sphere as a site where craft becomes a form of communication.

George Duerden

born 1926 Sabden, England
moved to Western Australia mid-1950s; lived Korijekup/Harvey and Boorloo/Perth, Western Australia
died 1986 Boorloo/Perth, Western Australia

The Bethrothed

1976
oil on canvas

Gift of Cliff Jones, 1995 1995/0024

The Betrothed would seem to flip the expectations that men might best cultivate an avoidant style of excessive independence and women an anxious style of dependency on them. Here the future wife is the dominant figure, while the man is smaller and definitely less powerful. Though, honestly, who really knows what goes on between them when they’re alone behind the stone walls of their remote country house.

Louise Paramor

born 1964 Warrang/Sydney, New South Wales
moved to Naarm/Melbourne, Victoria early 1980s

Letters, Lies & Alibis

2004
collage of synthetic polymer paint on paper

Gift of the artist, 2010 2010/0028.a-n

Paramor's ambitious collage references an array of Mills and Boons romance novels. While their stories might differ in detail most are linked by the desire to find a satisfactory partner and to love happily ever after. As you might expect there is much negotiating around the attachment styles of the romantic protagonists. By treating this subject with a combination of Pop and Minimalist means, Paramor's work offers a critical reflection on the relative value of genre art versus high culture art, and between what are seen as typically female forms and those more 'elevated' in the masculine tradition. Are we more genuinely attached to works that speak to our desire for how our lives are to be shaped or those that have been selected to speak for the community; indeed what is the difference between these two positions?

James Holland

born 1799 Burslem, England
moved to London, England 1819
died 1870 London, England

The Piazetta, Venice

1862
oil on card

Purchased 1905 1905/00P5

Holland was a successful English genre painter and Venice, which he first visited in 1835, became a recurring subject of his Romantic imagery. This work exemplifies the mid-nineteenth century European fascination with city life as both aesthetic spectacle and a site for social commentary. Within the piazetta, atmosphere and feeling dominate while individual figures appear as minor, ephemeral participants in larger environmental and social dramas.

The painting reflects how the acts of looking and being seen are forms of both economic and affective attachment that echo the tenuous bonds between people, places and social structures. Within the logic of capitalist exchange might we see the human presence in Holland's vision as purely provisional. At any moment our lives might be dispersed by forces beyond our control.

Peter Lanyon

born 1918 St Ives, England
served in the Royal Air Force during World War II (1941–1945)
returned to St Ives, England 1945
died 1964 Taunton, England

The Cape family

1949
oil on hardboard

Purchased 1974 1974/00P6

Lanyon was interested in representing the totality of our experience of the landscape. As he said, ‘I am trying to paint my environment both inside and out.’ In *The Cape family*, the people are fused with their environment while also appearing as a tight knit group almost compacted into each other. How does a family unit express an attachment style? Might this be measured by how welcoming they are of others into their midst, and how encouraging they are of its members to move in and out of the family structure?

John Nash

born 1893 London, England
served in the British Army during World War I (1914–1918)
lived London and Surrey, England
died 1977 Colchester, England

The Bathers

1920
oil on canvas

Purchased 1973 1973/0P24

In 1918 the artist John Nash married Christine Kühlenthal. Prior to this, as well as throughout their marriage, both had numerous other significant romantic attachments. Though they practiced an experimental form of living built on a secure attachment to each other, this security was not a constant; they were beset by bouts of intense jealousy in relation to each other's explorations, and when their other partners challenged them. For their partners outside the Nash-Kühlenthal marriage it must have appeared that the pair were the ultimate avoidants, dipping into the lives of others before leaving for the safe haven of their coupledom.

Emma Talbot

born 1969 Worcestershire, England
lives London, England

Unravel these knots

2016
zine and essay, printed book

Purchased through The Art Gallery of Western Australia Foundation: TomorrowFund, 2016
2016/0122.1-2

Sometimes our attachment styles see us blend into our partners in confusing and destabilising ways; at others in ecstatic moments of shared reverie.

Anne Wallace

born 1970 Meanjin/Brisbane, Queensland
moved to Naarm/Melbourne, Victoria early 1990s
lived London, England 1994–1996
returned to Naarm/Melbourne, Victoria

In retrospect

1994
oil on canvas

Purchased through The Art Gallery of Western Australia Foundation: TomorrowFund, 2022
2022/0010

Wallace is known for her suggestive works showing traces of human drama enlivened by her attention to the mood of particular places. This painting was made after she left Australia for a stint in London to study at the Slade. As the figure looks behind her, there seems to be a retrospective assessment of where she's come from. There is an ominous cast to the painting, but the figure's composure indicates that there is caution not fear here; she is intent on calmly and coolly sinking into the unknown. The mirror also speaks to the figure's attachment to herself.

Tom Freeman

born 1985 Wooditjup/Margaret River, Western Australia
lives Walyalup/Fremantle, Western Australia

Down Talk

2022
oil and synthetic polymer paint on plywood with marri and jarrah frame

Purchased through Art Gallery of Western Australia Foundation: Emerging Artists' Fund, 2022
2022/0037

We all know people who engage in 'down talk', who trash everything and everyone around them. Their behaviour often leads to the creation of an environment where other people feel neither relaxed nor safe but are on constant guard against mounting melancholy or stinging criticism. While we all do this from time to time, do those who do this constantly actually want to be proved wrong and re-parented by us into better frames of mind? Or do they want us to feel as insecure as they do? Or is down talk, indeed, a welcome antidote at times to the toxic positivity of aspects of self-help culture?

Tom Freeman

born 1985 Wooditjup/Margaret River, Western Australia
lives Walyalup/Fremantle, Western Australia

The World is a Kind Place

2022
oil and synthetic polymer paint on plywood

Purchased through the Art Gallery of Western Australia Foundation, Emerging Artists' Fund, 2022 2022/0038

According to most psychologists, we are more likely to see the world as Freeman describes it here if we have a secure attachment style. However, if we see it as positive despite evidence of real issues this would not be the case, it could be a sign of an avoidant person trying to dodge reality.

Left to right

Colleen Ahern
born 1971 Leeton, New South Wales
moved to Naarm/Melbourne, Victoria mid 1990s

41.06 min (Stranded)
2016
oil on board

Purchased, 2023 2023/0022

landscape ummagumma
2019
oil on board

Purchased, 2023 2023/0025

66.33 cm (Jacksons Live)
2022
oil on board

Purchased, 2023 2023/0024

25.44 min (Almost in Love)
2022
oil on board

Purchased, 2023 2023/0015

...continued on next page

33.17 cm (Milestones)
2022
oil on board

Purchased, 2023 2023/0016

38.45 min (Let’s stick together)
2022
oil on board

Purchased, 2023 2023/0019

37.21 min (I say a little prayer)
2022
oil on board

Purchased, 2023 2023/0018

39.32 min
2015
oil on board

Purchased, 2023 2023/0020

39.44 min (Easter)
2022
oil on board

Purchased, 2023 2023/0021

...continued on next page

42.08 min (Quatro)

2022
oil on board

Purchased, 2023 2023/0023

37.16 min

2015
oil on board

Purchased, 2023 2023/0017

These small paintings by Ahern celebrate the attachments we have with cultural forms, in this case popular music. Each work here is based on a record cover (front or back) of a famous musician and demonstrates the way our engagement with their output becomes a significant part of ourselves. Such figures and songs might take the place of parents or friends at times, offering attachments that leverage different ways of being for us.

Noel McKenna

born 1956 Meanjin/Brisbane, Queensland
moved to Warrang/Sydney, New South Wales 1979

Building with cats

2023
oil on canvas

Purchased through The Art Gallery of Western Australia Foundation: TomorrowFund, 2025
2025/0046

There is a truism that there are dog people and there are cat people. Some are obsessed with aloof and avoidant cats, others by the mix of needy and secure styles of dogs. Do their pets mirror them or offer a complementary style to the household's emotional landscape?

John Brack

born 1920 Naarm/Melbourne, Victoria
died 1999 Naarm/Melbourne, Victoria

The Short Street

1953
oil on canvas

Purchased 1954 1954/00P2

Even though we might live in a bustling, crowded city we often feel isolated and alone, detached from meaning and real connection. This painting touches on the subject of urban alienation, a recurrent them for Brack, with its focus on a lone person delivering milk. However, is more ambiguous than his other works. Did the milk-person choose this solo job to avoid having to work with others, or because it allows them to connect with many people on their doorsteps each morning, people who are dependent on them in a way?

Hans Heysen

born 1877 Hamburg, Germany
moved to Tarntanya/Adelaide, South Australia 1883
lived Paris, France 1899–1903
returned to Hahndorf and Mount Barker, South Australia 1904
died 1968 Mt Barker, South Australia

Droving into the light

1914-1921
oil on canvas

Gift of Mr W H Vincent, 1922 1922/00P1

German born Hans Heysen painted this idyllic vision of the Australian landscape in his studio at Hahndorf, a village near Adelaide where he worked for much of his life. It's a celebration of peaceful dependency between sheep and their shepherd on horseback, describing a world where such attachments are neatly subsumed by larger attachments to the richly enveloping environment that binds their existence in a 'natural' whole, a realm that marks the context and limit of their mutual existences.

George Lambert

born 1873 St Petersburg, Russia
moved to Warrang/Sydney, New South Wales 1887
lived London, England and Paris, France 1901–1911
returned to Warrang/Sydney, New South Wales 1911
died 1930 Cobbity, New South Wales

Derwent Wood and Family

1905
oil on cedar panel

Purchased 1978 1978/00P7

Lambert's artistic focus was typically on social vignettes. In this small painting the main subjects are the English Sculptor, Derwent Wood, and his wife, Florence Schmidt, an Australian singer. The group's relationships seem relaxed yet also a little separate and there is a hint of chaos around them. The maid tends to them and the members of the family seem to all tend, largely, to themselves.

Micky Allan

born 1944 Naarm/Melbourne, Victoria
lives Naarm/Melbourne, Victoria

I clutch my ideas

1985
oil and oil pastel on canvas

Purchased from the Moet and Chandon
Art Acquisition Fund, 1986 1986/0246

Allan is an artist most typically associated with postmodernism, key to which is a deployment of a variety of codes and symbols that describe how the world ‘speaks’ itself. Such work can be ironic and detached, or impassioned and political. Here, Allan invests the collision of tropes with a kind of anxiety; these pictorial ideas are *clutched*, not lightly held. We can almost imagine them being pulled into the body and kept tight and safe as an attempt to integrate them. Allan implies that ideas might be life rafts at times; whether they keep us positively afloat in times of chaos or separate from necessary change is a question she keeps provocatively open.

Sydney Long

born 1871 Burbong/Goulburn, New South Wales
lived Warrang/Sydney, New South Wales, 1871–1900; London, England 1900–1904; Warrang/Sydney, New South Wales
1904–1939
returned to London, England 1939
died 1955 London, England

The hour of romance

1914
oil on canvas

Purchased 1975 1975/0P18

John Longstaff

born 1862 Clunes, Victoria
lived Paris, France 1888–1894; London, England 1894–1920
returned to Naarm/Melbourne, Victoria 1920
died 1941 Naarm/Melbourne, Victoria

Breaking the news

1887
oil on canvas

Purchased with funds from the Hackett Bequest Fund, 1933 1933/00P4

A woman with a newborn baby in her arms is being told her husband has been killed in a mining accident. The future of mother and child is now uncertain; the men outside are concerned and apprehensive. How setbacks are faced and how risky situations, in work or leisure, are sought out or avoided are related to attachment styles. Equally, early childhood loss can significantly impact how attachments are subsequently formed. The flood of emotional trauma might destabilise the sense of a stable world to be secure in. Or it might be a foundation of a more resilient self.

Mandy Martin

born 1952 Tarntanya/Adelaide, South Australia
moved to Canberra, Australian Capital Territory 1978
died 2021 Orange, New South Wales

Fusion 2

1984
oil on canvas

Purchased 1984 1984/0P12

We all leak and spill at times; emotions and words cascade from us despite how hard we try to hold back. Art can be a place that allows this to occur, for boundaries to be imaginatively and temporarily crossed and aspects of ourselves to be expressed that in real life we would avoid. This might include giving ourselves over to our need for connection and totally fusing with another or the world.

George Pitt Morison

born 1861 Naarm/Melbourne, Victoria
lived Paris, France 1890–1893
returned to Naarm/Melbourne, Victoria 1893
moved to Boorloo/Perth, Western Australia 1894
died 1946 Naarm/Melbourne, Victoria

The Foundation of Perth

1929
oil on canvas

Gift of George Pitt Morison, 1929 1977/0P17

This painting was made to mark the centenary of the ceremony held on 12 August 1829 naming the town of Perth (after the Scottish city) and proclaiming the existence of the Swan River Colony under English rule. Helena Dance, the wife of one of the assembled sailors, is about to make the first cut in the tree after the colony's inaugural Governer, James Stirling, has read out a declaration from King George IV. The declaration established a formal attachment between Empire and this place that was and remains the home of the Noongar people. There is a rigid awkwardness to the figures involved. This is no doubt a result of Pitt Morison's imperfect skills in this area, but it might also symbolise the impossibility of seamlessly unifying the tranquility of the naturalistic landscape setting with the violence against Indigenous people that allowed it to be depicted in this way and which the ceremony uncomfortably signifies.

Freda Robertshaw

born 1916 Warrang/Sydney, New South Wales
lived The Blue Mountains, New South Wales
died 1997 Warrang/Sydney, New South Wales

The butterfly

c1940
oil on canvas

Purchased 1975 1975/0P27

The adults here are creating a zone of safe play for the children. Perhaps the girl has been off exploring and is being welcomed back; or she is being encouraged *not* do so because it's lunch time; or because the adult wants to keep an eye on her. Either way, this appears to be a painting about establishing a secure and bounded area for engaging with the natural world through parental guidance.

Questions of freedom were important to Robertshaw during her lifetime. She was taught by artist Charles Meere and took on elements of his fastidious style, but eventually came to find his influence oppressive. Her form of rebellion came in 1944 when she produced a full length nude self-portrait that would be her last ever oil painting; after that, Robertshaw returned to her first passion, making watercolours of flowers and landscapes.

John Russell

born 1858 Warrang/Sydney, New South Wales
died 1930 Warrang/Sydney, New South Wales

Les Aiguilles de Belle-Île

c1890
oil on canvas

Purchased with funds from the Great Australian Paintings Appeal, 1984

1984/00P7

Lucian Freud

born 1922 Berlin, Germany
moved to London, England 1933
died 2011 London, England

Naked man with rat

1977–1978
oil on canvas

Purchased 1984 1984/00P4

Some people are cat people, others are dog people. Raymond Jones was the Rat Man.

In this painting, Jones' attachment to Freud sits in an ambiguous space of devotion and dependence. Jones was a friend, lender and vulnerable sitter, who was drawn into an asymmetric relational field. Freud called it his first 'nice' portrait, yet its dynamic echoes an anxious-avoidant bond: one party seeking recognition, the other controlling the terms of exposure. The doped up rat amplifies this tension. A symbol of what is endured in order to stay close. The painting holds their power imbalance tenderly, but never lets it resolve.

Nicole Zhang

born 1997 Warrang/Sydney, New South Wales
works Gadigal/Sydney, New South Wales

The preparation

2024
synthetic polymer paint on canvas

Purchased through the Art Gallery of Western Australia Foundation: TomorrowFund, 2025 2025/0047

The complex task of meal preparation is rendered as a live performance by Zhang. While the figures labour as a team, each has an individual task and seems to possess an intense focus, a focus that renders them almost isolated in their activity. Are they avoidants working at their fear of closeness bit by bit? Or might they have been anxious types who are working at steps towards individuation?

Left to right

Stanley Spencer
born 1891 Cookham, Berkshire, England
worked England
died 1959 Cliveden, Berkshire, England

Christ in the Wilderness: The foxes have holes
1939
oil on canvas

Purchased 1983 1983/00P1

Christ in the Wilderness: He departed into a mountain to pray
1939
oil on canvas

Purchased 1983 1983/00P2

Christ in the Wilderness: The scorpion
1939
oil on canvas

Purchased 1983 1983/0

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Christ in the Wilderness: Consider the lilies

1939
oil on canvas

Purchased 1983 1983/00P4

Christ in the Wilderness: Rising from sleep in the morning

1940
oil on canvas

Purchased 1983 1983/00P5

Christ in the Wilderness: Driven by the spirit into the wilderness

1942
oil on canvas

Purchased 1983 1983/00P6

Christ in the Wilderness: The eagles

1943
oil on canvas

Purchased 1983 1983/00P7

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Christ in the Wilderness: The hen

1954
oil on canvas

Purchased 1983 1983/00P8

Christ in the Wilderness [unfinished painting]

1954
oil on canvas on hardboard

Purchased, 1983 1983/00P9

Immediately after his baptism, when he is publicly named as God's beloved Son, Christ is driven by the Spirit into the wilderness, where he remains for forty days and nights. The number recalls other periods of biblical wandering: the forty years of Israel's journey through the desert, Moses's forty days on Mount Sinai, Elijah's forty-day journey to Horeb. Periods of separation, testing and encounter that precede a return to the world.

In 1938, Stanley Spencer began to imagine what might have happened during those forty days. He planned forty paintings, one for each day and night of Lent, but completed only eight. Rather than depicting the dramatic temptations described in the Gospels, Spencer turns to the spaces between events: Christ sleeping and waking,

...continued on next page

praying, looking at lilies, encountering foxes, eagles, a scorpion and a hen.

The wilderness in these paintings is not empty. Christ is alone, but everywhere around him life continues. Animals seek shelter, flowers grow and birds move through the sky. Here, separation does not mean the end of relation. Removed from the human world and its familiar forms of recognition, Christ encounters another kind of belonging: bodily, earthly and immediate. Spencer's forty days become less a story of withdrawal than an exploration of what it means to remain oneself while being radically apart from others—to discover that solitude, however absolute, is never quite the same thing as being without relation.

Emma Talbot

born 1969 Worcestershire, England
works in London, England

Before I Loved You, Love, Nothing Was My Own

2015
acrylic on canvas

Purchased through The Art Gallery of Western Australia Foundation: TomorrowFund, 2016 2016/0069

In the manner of a single-page comic, this painting tells the story of the passing of Talbot's husband. One scene shows the artist and her children in his last days. Everything is suffused with loss, and a sense of quiet foreboding about what the future will bring.

Skyler Chen
born 1982 Taiwan

visiting the Castro
2025
oil on linen

Purchased through the Art Gallery of Western Australia Foundation: TomorrowFund, 2025

2025/0048

Chen's painting depicts a dreamlike streetscape in the iconic queer neighbourhood of the Castro District in San Francisco. Rendered in rich, sun-saturated hues with a deliberate use of shadow and distorted scale, the painting conjures a bittersweet atmosphere where nostalgia and estrangement collide. Figures stand apart yet connected by the urban environment and cultural markers—such as the *Out Traveler* magazine prominently featured—suggesting themes of queer visibility, longing and hopeful transformation. The momentary revery of the cautious yet daring connection between the two men in a public space is, however, about to be interrupted by the woman. We might assume that the man looking put at us will hear her and close his trench coat, and walk on as if nothing ever happened, or was about to.

Emma Buswell

born 1991 Boorloo/Perth, Western Australia
works Boorloo/Perth, Western Australia

The Pool (Narcissus)

2024
wool, cotton and lurex

Purchased through the Art Gallery of Western Australia Foundation: TomorrowFund, 2026

2026/0014

Sosa Joseph

born 1971 Parumala, India
works Kochi and Bangalore, India

Śarada

2023–24
oil on canvas

Purchased through
The Art Gallery of Western Australia Foundation
with funds donated by the Next Collective, 2024 2024/0063

Śarada reflects upon a poignant moment in the lives of the women and girls from Joseph's hometown of Parumala. It shows a group of women gathered to wash the pale body of Śarada, an unmarried pregnant girl whose life ended tragically in the Pamba river. At the centre, a kneeling woman dressed in red—Joseph's mother, who witnessed this event as a teenager in the 1950s—grounds the work in familial memory and lends it a sobering observational quality. Unfolding as a generational cautionary tale of the titular figure's perceived moral transgression and impurity, this work explores the intricate network of cultural expectations that often define the boundaries of womanhood in South India.

Working in an improvisational and introspective manner, Joseph interweaves scenes of everyday South Indian life with symbolic motifs drawn from her girlhood and the natural world. Her works reshape the tradition of history painting by merging personal experiences with shared histories to illuminate how individual lives are shaped by the intersecting forces of memory, culture and place.

Rosa Bonheur

born 1822 Bordeaux, France
died 1899 By, France

Seaweed gatherers, coast of Brittany

1856
oil on canvas

On loan from the Shenker Family, 1989 1989/0L31

Tom Freeman

born 1985 Margaret River, Western Australia
works in Boorloo/Perth, Western Australia

I’ve cum to clean the pool

2006
single channel 4:3 digital video with stereo audio, 13 min 11 sec

Purchased through the Sir Claude Hotchin Art Foundation,
The Art Gallery of Western Australia Foundation, 2023 2023/0075

Hi. So. What? Okay. Yeah. So. Um. Okay. Yeah. Ah.

Tentative. Beautiful. Gentle. Vulnerable. Dopey.

So intimate it’s almost unbearable. So awkward, ditto. So much going on in the nothing at all that’s going on.

Anyways. Yeah. Okay. Bye.

An incredible series of moments by Freeman, the slacker prince of Perth video art, whose work in an international context slots perfectly between filmmaker Kevin Smith and Richard Linklater’s movies and, more recently, the playwright Annie Baker.