

# Introduction

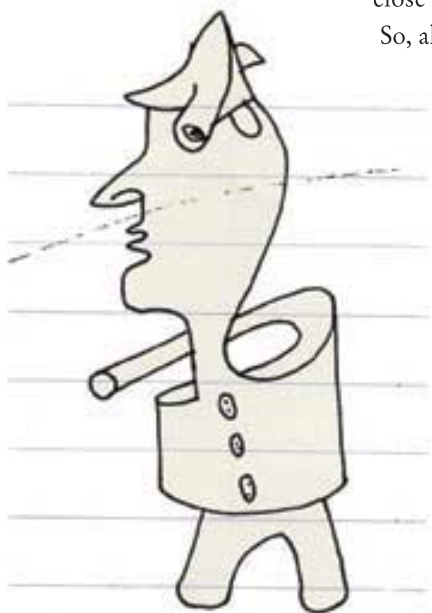
When he died from a heroin overdose in his Melbourne studio in July 1999, aged only 48, Howard Arkley had just achieved the greatest successes of a 25-year-long career that still promised considerably more.

A prominent member of a generation of younger artists who emerged in the 1970s and dominated Australian art in the closing decades of the twentieth century, Arkley was unusual among his contemporaries in also achieving a substantial popular reputation. His images of suburban houses, frankly stylised in their use of air-brushed outline and brighter-than-life colours, remain among the most recognisable and widely admired examples of recent Australian art, striking a powerful chord of recognition with many viewers. But he explored other significant subjects as well, including decorative and ornamental traditions, urban imagery, and the human face and figure. In fact, close attention to his notes, drawings and studio sources reveals a wide array of interests.

So, alongside a critical appraisal of Arkley's status as the painter of the so-called 'suburban dreaming', this study explores other dimensions to his art, examining his fascination with pattern, optical effects, and colour, his 'Postmodern' taste for popular culture (comics, toys, and so on), and his abiding interest in collaboration. In particular, I propose that his art may be understood best through the idea of the 'carnavalesque', the theory that play, hybrid and grotesque imagery, masks and comedy open up celebratory paths to creativity. *Carnevale* offers profound insights into Arkley's oeuvre, suggesting powerful and accessible new perspectives from which to explore his art, including his best-known imagery.<sup>1</sup>

The central focus is Arkley's art – his claim to fame, after all – but the circumstances of his life, especially his final years, also demand attention. His topsy-turvy final months were marked in rapid succession by local and international recognition of his work as Australia's representative at the Venice Biennale, critical acclaim for his first commercial exhibition in the United States, his Las Vegas marriage to long-time partner Alison Burton, and finally his fatal overdose, only days after returning from overseas. Such a melodramatic chain of events can hardly fail to appeal to commentators with a taste for sensationalism, and those who like to draw neat parallels

between artists' work and life. Thus, *The Ritual* (1986) [FIGURE 4.17] is often seen, simplistically, as an image of the artist himself, glossing over the way in which its anonymous subject enacts the hard reality of inner-city urban rituals in paradoxically Pop, comic-book style. Similarly, even before his death, and most definitely since, *Psychedelic Head* (1990) [FIGURE 6.29] has been understood as an effective 'self-portrait', the very image of drug-crazed intensity and troubled creativity. In fact, this work was one of a thoughtful and arresting series of large-scale 'masks' Arkley exhibited in



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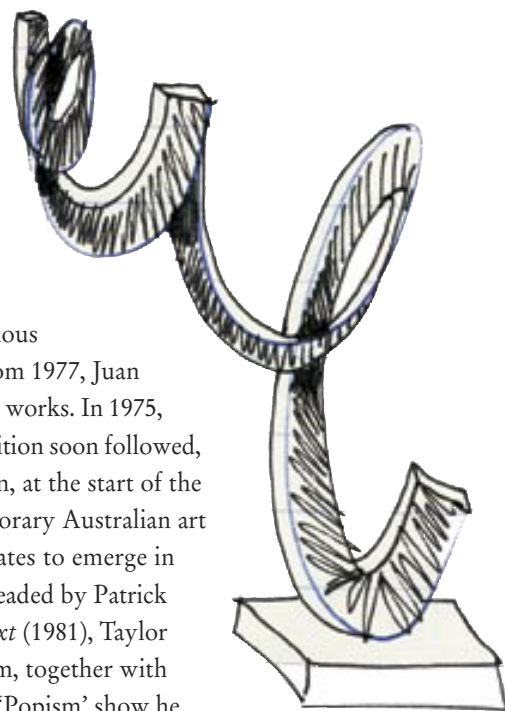
1990, coopting various sources, ranging from robots and graphic novels, to celebrity portraits and Byzantine icons.<sup>2</sup>

Similarly one-dimensional accounts have been given of Arkley's life, writing him into a contemporary cautionary tale about unstable creativity and squandered talent, alongside Brett Whiteley, Michael Hutchence and other substance-abusing celebrities. Actually, though, for every work that might exemplify his career as a drug fiend, there are many others that reveal a different story. The very precision and intricacy of line and pattern in many of his paintings should sound a note of caution for anyone inclined to the casual assumption that he painted in a doped frenzy. Unlike Whiteley, who repeatedly foregrounded the link between his creativity and mind-altering substances, Arkley was shame-faced about his habit, rarely parading it self-consciously. Obviously, it did affect his life significantly, tragically in the end, but to dwell on it to the extent that some commentators prefer is simplistic, substituting crude clichés for the real complexities and character of his art.

Mention of Brett Whiteley raises some of the key debates that informed Australian art when Arkley began painting, and continued to affect his own and others' evolution in succeeding decades. In 1979, when Sandra McGrath first published her major monograph on Whiteley, the Sydney painter still seemed the epitome of creative energy and expressive intensity. Looking back, though, Whiteley looks increasingly like one of the last representatives of the modern artist-genius, a type already fading from sight even before Picasso's death in 1973.<sup>3</sup> Arkley belonged to a younger generation emerging in the 1970s, for whom the paint-laden self-regard of modernist artists seemed anachronistic by comparison with the cool, ironic stance of Andy Warhol and his contemporaries. From the moment when Pop Art was first shown in Australia in the late 1960s, it has been characterised by some local commentators as trite, or alienated (or both); and Arkley and other Australian 'Popists' have often been tarred with the same brush.<sup>4</sup> But Pop simply opened the Pandora's box of cultural crossovers, layered meaning and irony, that later came to be known as Postmodernism.

Arkley embarked on his career when many of these issues were still in the balance, and change was the norm. In the late 1960s, that period of world-wide social ferment, the Australian art world was also in a volatile state, not least in Melbourne, the site of vanguard artistic change during the era of the so-called 'Angry Penguins' and Antipodeans in the 1940s and 1950s, and still a vigorous arena for debate in subsequent decades.<sup>5</sup> In his early student years, Arkley brushed with traditional landscape painting, Surrealism and hard-edge abstraction, and then, at the Prahran College of Advanced Education, began to experience and participate in the radical alternatives pre-occupying his own generation. In 1972, he met Elizabeth Gower (to whom he was married between 1973 and 1979), and other fellow-students including Jenny Watson, John Nixon, Peter Tyndall and Tony Clark, all of whom were to remain life-long friends, while gaining major recognition in their own right. During these formative years, he became acquainted with feminism, conceptualism and other significant elements of 1970s avant-garde practice and theory – concerns that clearly informed his work as it evolved into the heyday of Postmodernism.<sup>6</sup>

In 1974, Arkley acquired a significant institutional base, Tolarno Galleries, then located in Fitzroy Street, St Kilda, founded by the expatriate Frenchman Georges Mora, who had been closely allied with the Melbourne avant-garde since the 1950s. Tolarno exposed Arkley to the work and influence of Mora's significant stable of artists, notably John Brack (famous for his own earlier visual essays on the Melbourne suburban theme), and, from 1977, Juan Davila, with whom Arkley would later make his most substantial collaborative works. In 1975, Arkley staged the first of his many solo exhibitions at Tolarno. Critical recognition soon followed, including favourable reviews by Alan McCulloch and Robert Rooney.<sup>7</sup> Then, at the start of the next decade, he was written decisively into the developing story of contemporary Australian art by young Melbourne critic Paul Taylor, one of a flock of bright new graduates to emerge in the late 1970s from the new Visual Arts Department at Monash University, headed by Patrick McCaughey.<sup>8</sup> In an influential article in the first issue of his journal *Art & Text* (1981), Taylor described Arkley as an exemplar of 'New Wave' style, and then included him, together with Elizabeth Gower, Jenny Watson, and other contemporaries, in the ambitious 'Popism' show he curated in 1982 at the National Gallery of Victoria (where McCaughey had taken over as director).



## INTRODUCTION

For Taylor, Arkley typified the new art's cool preference for ironic layering and 'second-degree' quotation from modernist art and pop culture.<sup>9</sup>

These critical developments were fundamental for Arkley's subsequent reputation and success; but, in retrospect, they obscure as much as they reveal about his art. True, he joked later about how different his technique was from the expressive approach of the archetypal traditional artist, 'with paint running down to [his] armpits'.<sup>10</sup> However, as his library and notebooks reveal, he repeatedly consulted studies on historical art and architecture, especially from the modern era, and often incorporated such references into his own work, alongside pop culture elements. Frequently, it was the very tension between these diverse sources and traditions that gave his art its particular strength and complexity, as for instance in his early door-format canvases, simultaneously evoking the high-modernist abstraction of Mark Rothko or Morris Louis, and the appearance of fabric samples or wallpaper.<sup>11</sup> Besides revealing a sophisticated and knowledgeable stance, these approaches also warn against simply pigeon-holing Arkley as a stereotypical 'Popist'. Clearly, Postmodern and Pop strategies appealed to him, and are easily traced in his work. However, he was equally heir to a long tradition in Australian art, particularly in Melbourne, involving the contradictory merging of radical aims with more modest, even conservative tendencies. For instance, his suburban images, for all their formal invention, sometimes seem perfect metaphors for the small-l liberal values of Sir Robert Menzies' famous 'forgotten people' speech of 1942, identifying the suburban home, in both literal and symbolic terms, as a key symbol of middle-class values.<sup>12</sup>



Likewise, Arkley's aesthetic strategy could be described as an eclectic blend of traditional and radical tendencies. More often than not, his art seems to 'dance along the boundaries between past/present, belief/disdain, modern/postmodern', as one recent commentator puts it.<sup>13</sup> Similarly, rather than becoming embroiled in the bitter debates that often divide the Australian art world, he usually tended to steer his own middle path.<sup>14</sup> This open-mindedness may account, in large part, for his popularity as a teacher at Prahran CAE and other Melbourne art schools, and for the way in which he became a mentor for a whole range of younger artists, some of whom still feel his influence.<sup>15</sup> It may also provide one of the keys to Arkley's extraordinary capacity to bridge the gap between sophisticated and popular taste in Australian visual culture.

Some additional preliminary comments may be helpful. Since the book does not proceed chronologically, because of its thematic approach, readers interested in a general sense of the broad patterns of the artist's life should consult the brief biographical sketch preceding this Introduction. Works of art cited in the text and illustration captions are identified by title and date, and an indication of ownership (where appropriate); where owners are not indicated, works are in un-named private collections. The List of Illustrations has further details on the size and medium of individual works.



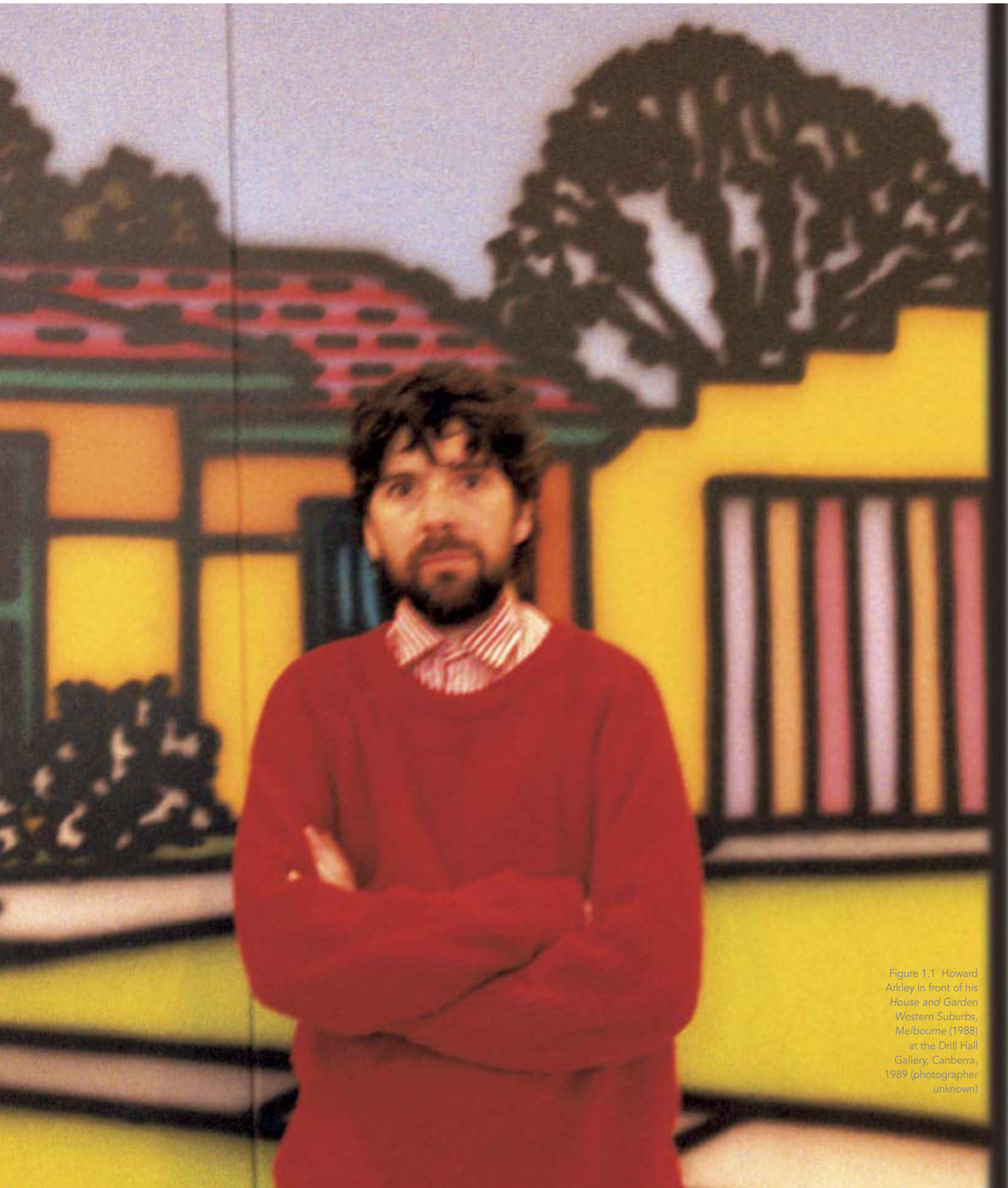


Figure 1.1 Howard Arkley in front of his *House and Garden, Western Suburbs, Melbourne (1988)* at the Drill Hall Gallery, Canberra, 1989 (photographer unknown)

1

# Suburbia and Its Discontents

**The Pointillist Suburb houses are my best work to date. Formally they are successful, beautiful, meaningful images – they ring true. People come to them and respond to them. They say ‘I know that’.**

(Howard Arkley, as quoted by Crawford & Edgar, 1997)<sup>1</sup>

**I would now describe myself as an outsider from the truly suburban environment and lifestyle.**

(Howard Arkley, notebook, c.1988)<sup>2</sup>

**One of the central experiences of suburbanization is a sense of loss.**

(David Nicholson-Lord, environmentalist, 1998)<sup>3</sup>

Howard Arkley shared many non-indigenous Australians’ experience of a remarkably disconnected relationship to the huge, seemingly empty continent we inhabit. As one of the characters in Tim Winton’s award-winning 2001 novel *Dirt Music* observes, with dry irony: ‘People are terrified of the wide, brown land’.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, as has often been observed, the great majority of Australians live in coastal cities, as far as possible from the tellingly named ‘dead heart’, rarely venturing into the bush, except to dig something valuable out of it or to rush to another city. Arkley’s art consistently reflects these dominant facts about contemporary Australian life. In a deliberate rejection of the landscape painting tradition – from Tom Roberts, Streeton and Heysen through to Nolan, Olsen and Fred Williams – his themes, and style, are insistently urban and, in particular, suburban.

Despite its ‘otherness’ (or perhaps precisely because of it), the landscape continues to exercise a powerful pull on the Australian cultural imaginary.<sup>5</sup> But Arkley’s suburban theme presents a strong alternative myth, one with much more obvious relevance to most of the country’s inhabitants. In other words, his suburban streetscapes and interiors strike a powerful popular chord, tapping deep into many Australians’ everyday experience.

In 1989, Richard Brown described Arkley as ‘spraying the suburban dream’, cleverly inflecting the Australian indigenous idea of the ‘dreaming’, the traditional stories of each Aboriginal language group.<sup>6</sup> The thought-provoking implication is that his suburban images carry mythic meanings for settler cultures, paralleling those deep-seated forces discerned in the land by indigenous Australians. Thus, his paintings could also be understood as an effective response to the claim that ‘white man got no dreaming’.<sup>7</sup> Thinking along these lines, one 1990s curator contrasted Arkley’s work with that of a contemporary Aboriginal painter, suggesting, provocatively enough, that: ‘For non Aboriginal people, looking at Howard Arkley’s paintings may be about as close as they may ever get to the experience that an Aboriginal person would have looking at a Kathleen Petyarre painting’.<sup>8</sup>

Another explanation for the popular appeal of Arkley’s houses may be their *tone* – clearly non-judgemental, often apparently affectionate towards the suburban dreaming. Shortly before his death, he explained his suburban theme to a British TV interviewer at the 1999 Venice Biennale: ‘It’s where 95 per cent of Australians actually live – they actually don’t live out in the desert ... Australians get my work straightaway ... they understand that they’re not being put down either – it’s not satirical’.<sup>9</sup> This message, reiterating comments Arkley had made several times before, fell on fertile ground in the later 1980s and 1990s, when the unrelentingly high-brow, rather dour attitudes of an older generation of creative artists and critics had given way to a much more positive, populist and ‘multi-cultural’ view of suburbia generally.<sup>10</sup> The strongest evidence is provided by the success of TV shows like ‘Neighbours’ and ‘Home and Away’ (mirroring suburban life, or at least ratings-friendly versions of it, back to hundreds of thousands of middle Australians), and popular films like *The Castle* (Rob Sitch, 1997), with its extraordinarily well-received theme of the little Aussie battler and his family defending their home against assorted predatory individuals and institutions.





Figure 1.2 *Family Home* 1988





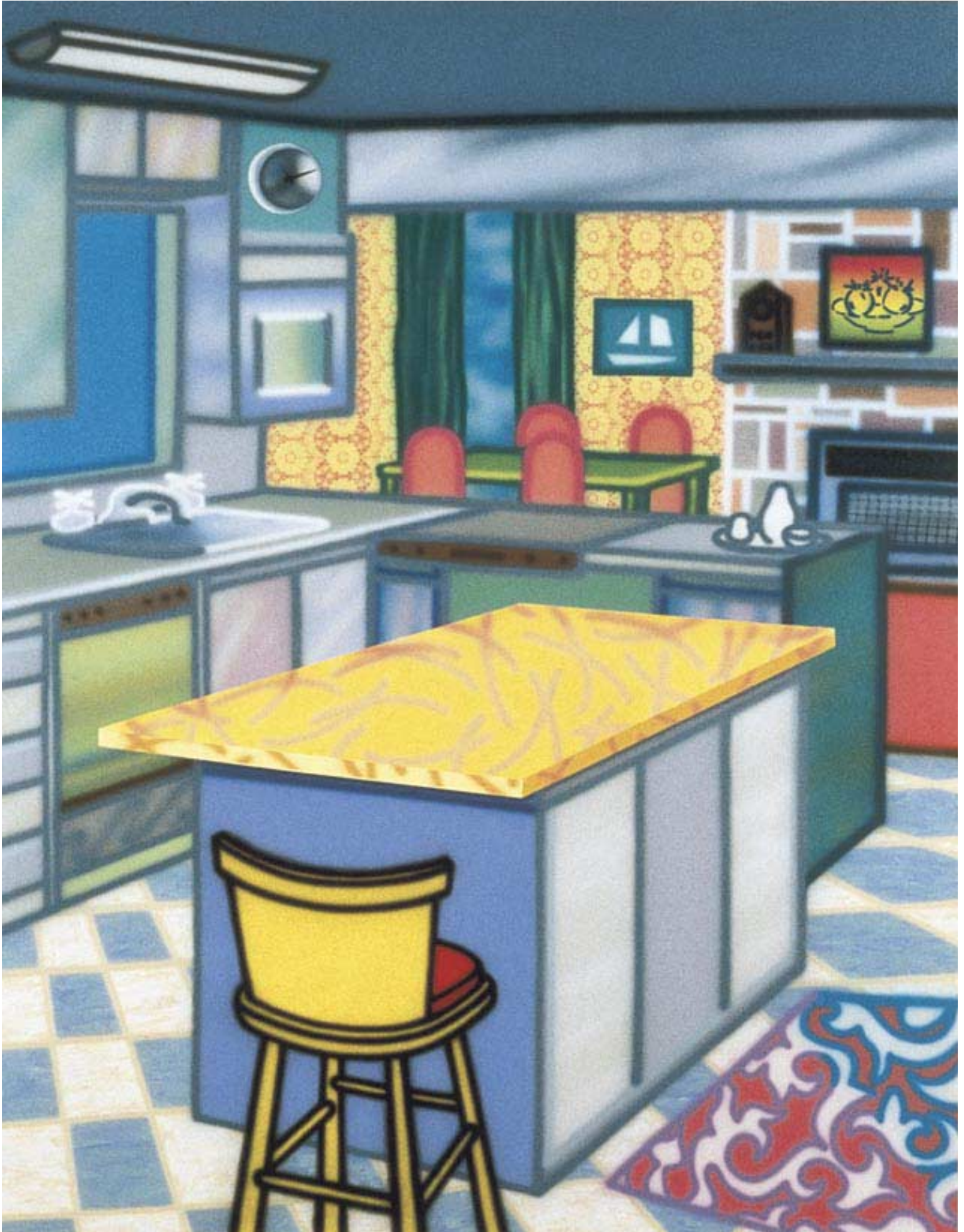


Figure 1.3 *Ultraleen* 1992



#### SUBURBIA AND ITS DISCONTENTS

Such attitudes contrast markedly with the typical high-culture position that prevailed for much of the twentieth century, portraying the suburban and domestic realm as a cultural wasteland – best simply ignored, or satirised, often mercilessly, as a sort of kitsch hell on earth. Influential Australian instances, many of them focussing on Melbourne in particular, include the writings of architectural critic Robin Boyd, and the comedy of Barry Humphries (aka Edna Everage).<sup>11</sup> These views may be related to an international trend, described in a recent study subtitled ‘the suppression of domesticity in modern art and architecture’. As the editor observes, the tendency has been reversed only lately: ‘In contrast to the ambivalent – even antagonistic – relationship between domesticity and Modernism, the postmodern era has witnessed a kind of homecoming in high culture, as artists and designers have (re)turned their attention to domesticity’.<sup>12</sup> Arkley is a key figure in the local variant of this significant change, consciously attempting, along with precursors and contemporaries such as painters Robert Rooney and Jenny Watson, and architects Maggie Edmond and Peter Corrigan, to address the suburban reality of so many ordinary people’s lives in later twentieth-century Australia.<sup>13</sup>

In 1996, University of Melbourne academic Chris McAuliffe published *Art and Suburbia*, a major study of this complex and sometimes contradictory tradition in Australian visual culture. For McAuliffe, Arkley was one of the leading representatives of a new wave of artists, who sought not to damn the suburbs from the comfort of a high-culture vantage point, but to accept, document and even celebrate the way most people actually live.<sup>14</sup> In tune with these reassessments, archetypal Arkley images like *Family Home* (1988) [FIGURE 1.2] regularly appeared during the 1990s in exhibitions and articles emphasising the democratisation of contemporary Australia, and the breakdown of the old, smug attitudes to phenomena such as mass housing and popular domestic taste.<sup>15</sup>

Arkley was always alert to studies of suburbia that broke with the traditional view. He owned a copy of a classic study by prominent English architectural writer J. M. Richards, who argued, precociously for 1946, that the realities of suburban life and taste ought to be given serious and open-minded consideration by architects and planners in Great Britain.<sup>16</sup> Arkley also regularly kept and ear-marked articles arguing for the postmodern position on suburbia – for instance, an interview, in a 1987 issue of *Flash Art*, with Italian designer Ettore Sottsass, who is quoted, in words Arkley himself might have used, as saying: ‘I consider suburbia as a cultural area of high quality, perhaps sometimes melancholy, but where I have felt the most intense emotions of my life’.<sup>17</sup>

Arkley’s own comments on the subject were frequent, and typically enthusiastic. In a TV documentary made shortly before he died, he developed a detailed analysis, illustrated with appropriately extravagant gestures:

Ordinary houses are full of pattern. You go into a house, there’s no art ... but it’s filled with kind of second-degree imagery – the patterning around the fireplace, on the curtains, in the carpet; and the different bricks on the different houses, and the pattern between the gutter, the nature-strip, the footpath, then you have the fence, then you have the lawn, the house, the tiles, then you have the beautiful sky ... and I missed the bushes in between ... it’s *rich*.<sup>18</sup>

Such remarks are highly evocative of the most endearing and also *heroic* qualities of Arkley’s houses (points to which I will return).

At the same time, there is a danger of being misled into evaluating his suburban imagery simplistically, of concluding that he just embraced his middle-brow heritage and surroundings unquestioningly. This view, in my opinion, sells him seriously short – on several counts. For a start, it is worth emphasising the obvious point that Arkley’s paintings are just that – paintings. John Nixon, one of his artist friends, comments:

There is a certain populist view that Howard was a painter of the Australian vernacular. Some of the later paintings that Howard did of so-called houses, some of the freeways and so forth, are ... [essentially abstract works] ... and I think this return to abstraction would have shown people that it was all about colour and pattern and shape – he just found different vehicles to fit in with those things.<sup>19</sup>

Nixon, long committed to abstraction in his own work, tends to overstate the case here: Arkley’s subjects are surely more than mere pretexts for formal display and investigation. But, even leaving aside for the moment the distinctive characteristics of Arkley’s aesthetic, his suburban images often seem edgier, and less easy to ‘get’, than many people imagine, or have been led to believe. As he himself began to lament in his later years, at least privately, the idea of his art has become simplified by the

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positive spin placed on suburbia – and his own so clearly recognisable images of it – to the extent that one might imagine he painted nothing but bright and breezy canvases celebrating Australian everyday life.

His suburban work may lack an obviously satirical edge, but that does not mean he always viewed his subject with a completely benevolent eye. True, he rejected the older idea of the banality of the 'burbs exemplified by figures like John Brack and Barry Humphries, but he was also very well versed in their best material – Brack's acerbic images of the flat, brown, middle-brow aesthetic of 1950s and 1960s Melbourne streets and houses, or withering lines like Humphries's 'It's beautifully quiet in Highett' (set to an appropriately mindless jingle).<sup>20</sup> The characteristic emptiness and flatness of some of Arkley's houses relate much more closely to such precedents than many commentators like to admit, although the artist himself was well aware of these dimensions to his work. In 1989, for instance, he told Richard Brown:

The subjects that I choose are very impersonal. It's about the Australian suppressed experience in the suburbs. Being not very expressive, and tight, and kitchens having plenty of Omo, and Laminex, and it's all neat and clean, the lawns are all mowed ...<sup>21</sup>

Occasionally, he even conceded that suburbia could leave a bitter taste, admitting to one interviewer, shortly before his death, that it could seem 'soulless, tragic and sad'.<sup>22</sup>

In August 1998, amidst a flurry of publicity surrounding his *Fabricated Rooms* installation [FIGURE 1.22], Arkley reportedly told an interviewer asking for his view on whether suburban life was tedious: 'It's a myth, an elitist view. I'm having a great time'.<sup>23</sup> But exactly two years earlier, he had confessed to another journalist that he was finding the reality of downtown Oakleigh wearisome: 'I actually moved out to the suburbs to get a hands-on experience ... and it's really boring. I've just about worn out my stay'.<sup>24</sup> The apparent contradiction rings true: depending on his state of mind, Arkley could see suburbia in either golden or melancholy light. Rather than selecting either position as the real 'truth', the contradiction itself should be seen as significant, unveiling a struggle in the artist's own psyche, and prompting a more searching examination of his urban and suburban imagery than has often been attempted. His 1996 admission that suburbia can be a bore evokes uneasy echoes of the charge occasionally levelled at paintings such as *Ultraleen* (1992) [FIGURE 1.3], to the effect that his imagery is banal, his style far too deadpan.<sup>25</sup> Such criticisms highlight the tricky game Arkley often played in these works, daring viewers to suspect a vacant core to his (their, our) world, for all its comfortable familiarity. Whether or not all this indicates a deep unease of spirit (a conclusion some viewers may reach), such contradictions certainly lend his mature art much of its tension and strength.

Arkley's suburban house images, then, may be typically buoyant and non-judgemental, but they can also evoke deep mythic constructions in the Australian psyche, and on occasions betray troubling dimensions. In the remainder of this chapter, some of these varied facets of his urban and suburban theme are examined. Viewed in total, these works reveal a vista that is, ironically enough, not unlike the vast Australian rural landscape: mostly flat, but occasionally surprisingly dramatic; by turns monotonous, familiar, rich and varied in texture and form; and even dark and alarming, at certain times of day, and in certain aspects.

### THE HEROISM OF SUBURBAN LIFE

IN 1863, the French poet and critic Charles Baudelaire announced the advent of 'The Painter of Modern Life', an artist supposedly equipped to evoke the modern world and its natural setting, the city. Baudelaire opted for a popular illustrator of the day, but the painter of the time who seems most apt is Edouard Manet. In controversial works like *Olympia* and *Le Déjeuner sur l'Herbe*, both also dating from 1863, Manet lampooned traditional subjects laden with mythical gods and heroes, and in large paintings like *Le Jardin des Tuileries* (1862) – featuring brilliant, sketchy portraits of the Parisian *bourgeoisie*, including Baudelaire himself – he produced visual manifestos to match what the poet called 'the heroism of modern life'.<sup>26</sup> Obviously, Arkley and Manet are worlds apart in terms of style and context, but in one way there is an exact parallel. Just as Baudelaire, Manet and their contemporaries registered the imperatives of the 'modern' in their search for new content and style appropriate to their own rapidly changing circumstances, so too Arkley and his peers grappled with the demand for new forms to encapsulate the central experiences of late twentieth-century Australian everyday life.