





CARNIVAL IN SUBURBIA
THE ART OF HOWARD ARKLEY

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Detail of figure 6.6 *Primitive*

Preface

This study has been researched and written from an unusual and privileged position. I first met Howard Arkley in 1990, through Alison Burton, my partner Shirley's sister. I knew his work, of course, although my professional activity at the time involved teaching and research in traditional art history. Living artists were a bit of a novelty for me in those days, and Howard was very much a live wire! At one stage during the first evening we met, an auspicious occasion, when an extraordinary quantity of French champagne was consumed, he suddenly threw his glass at the restaurant wall, not out of rage or angst, just from a boisterous urge to dramatise a particular point. Antics like this typified a kind of Mad Artist act he enjoyed performing at times (a trait that may be identified as 'carnavalesque', as I will argue later). In subsequent years, we met mostly in social and family situations, and further eccentric episodes followed, but it was always fascinating to talk to him about contemporary art, and to watch his work evolve. In 1992, he asked me to write the catalogue essay for his 'Mix 'n Match' show at Tolarno Galleries, an exhilarating opportunity for which I remain grateful. Later, after the initial shock of his sudden death had passed, and I had had a chance to talk to Alison, the idea of writing a more detailed study of his work developed, focussing especially on the 'unknown Arkley'. Access to his largely unpublished collections of sources and working material proved to be a revelation, which I hope to have transmitted to others interested in expanding their understanding of his art.

Whenever possible, I quote Arkley himself, and draw on my own memories of him, where appropriate. However, the book is not a memoir or apologia. Rather, my aim has been to produce a sustained account of his work, emphasising in particular its complexity and substance – factors that I believe have been underestimated at times, even by some of his advocates and fans.

Naturally, a study like this also relies on the knowledge and research of many others. I am grateful to everyone who answered my questions and corrected my errors (though, obviously, those that remain are my own responsibility). A key resource is the catalogue of the Monash University Gallery survey of Arkley's work (1991), to which both Jenepher Duncan and Merryn Gates contributed considerable research. Like anyone else interested in Arkley and his art, I am particularly indebted to Ashley Crawford and Ray Edgar's *Spray: The Work of Howard Arkley*. The authors, both close friends and influential supporters of the artist, provide numerous insights, for instance on the key role played by Punk and alternative music in Arkley's early development and subsequent work. Among the many others who helped with the project I thank Jan Minchin, who helped give me my first opportunity to write on Howard's work, and Kalli Rolfe, who has also provided tangible support for this project. Research and writing were assisted by Monash University, through study leave, and research grants from the Faculty of Arts, during 2002–03, and the Faculty of Art & Design, in 2006; and I thank my Monash colleagues, especially Leigh Astbury, Anne Marsh and Clive Probyn. Staff at the National Gallery of Victoria have also provided valuable advice and assistance, and here I thank Jason Smith and Geoffrey Smith in particular. Thanks are due too to the many individuals and institutions – too many to list here – who assisted with photographs. Kim Armitage at Cambridge University Press has been an enthusiastic supporter of the book from the start; I also thank her colleagues Sally Chick and Kate Indigo for their meticulous attention to the production, Chong Weng-Ho for his inspired design work, and the anonymous Cambridge readers who gave telling advice on earlier drafts.

On a more personal level, the book simply could not have been completed without the support of my partner, Shirley Law. For their love and inspiration, I'm grateful too to my parents, Leslie (Bae) and Ray (Greg), who would both have loved to have seen this book.

Above all I thank Alison Burton, who has been a constant advocate of this project, despite the difficulties it so obviously presented for her at times. Her tireless and self-effacing role, throughout the 1990s, in helping Howard through enormous difficulties, while also serving as his principal studio assistant, has never been given proper recognition. Indeed, she has been subjected to outrageous innuendo of a completely baseless kind, from certain quarters, since Howard's death. On the contrary, I sincerely believe that he would not have lived to produce many of the most brilliant works of his later career, without her. I dedicate this book to her with much admiration, gratitude and affection.



Figure 0.1 Howard Arkley with one of his 'Shadow Factory' canvases, 1989 (photo: Jeff Busby)

Howard Arkley – a biographical sketch

Readers should note that this is a thumbnail account only, designed to assist with the general outlines of Arkley's life, essentially his life as an artist, rather than providing exhaustive biographical detail.¹

1951–74

Arkley was born on 5 May 1951 and grew up in the Melbourne suburb of Surrey Hills, not far from where artist John Brack lived. He attended Surrey Hills Primary and Box Hill Technical School, and then enrolled at Prahran College of Advanced Education, undertaking a TOP course in painting in 1969, followed by a Diploma of Art & Design (Painting), 1970–75.

He drew prolifically in his early and student years, and from 1972 he also began to exhibit non-figurative paintings, winning a number of prizes, and receiving favourable critical notice.² In 1972, he met Elizabeth Gower (at Prahran CAE), and in 1973 they married, and moved into a studio-flat in Chapel Street, Prahran.

1975–81

His first one-man shows of 'white paintings' were at Georges Mora's Tolarno Galleries, St Kilda, April 1975 and August–September 1976, and at Coventry Gallery, Sydney, May 1977. In March 1977, Arkley's father died.³

From August 1977 to February 1978, supported by fellowships, he and Gower travelled overseas, living and working in Paris and New York. On their return, Gower began working at Prahran CAE, and Arkley embarked on a new series of door-format paintings [FIGURES 2.2–6, 3.15], exhibited at Tolarno (May 1979) and Coventry Gallery (March 1980), followed by a series of large-scale decorative/optical paintings including *Metallic* (1981) [FIGURE 2.13], exhibited at Tolarno (July 1981) and the Solander Gallery in Canberra (October 1981). Other major works dating from 1980–81 include *Tram no.384* [FIGURE 2.8], *Muzak Mural Chair Tableau* [FIGURE 2.9], *Muzak Mural* [FIGURE 2.12] and the work-on-paper mural *Primitive*, with which Arkley moved definitively into a more figurative phase [FIGURES 6.6, 6.8–10].

During this period he also became closely acquainted with other like-minded Melbourne artists, including Tony Clark, Peter Tyndall, John Nixon, and Juan Davila. From 1980 (till 1985), he taught TOP painting part-time at Prahran CAE. During 1981, he received significant attention from influential critics Paul Taylor (*Art & Text*, vol. 1) and Janine Burke (*Art & Australia*, vol. 18.4) (see Bibliography for full details). In 1979, Arkley and Gower separated, and in 1980 he began living with Lyn Oliver.

1982–88

This period sees the emergence of Arkley's 'classic' style, marked by a string of key works and exhibitions, from his contributions to 'Popism' (National Gallery of Victoria, June–July 1982, curated by Paul Taylor) [FIGURE 2.16], through to his first fully suburban show, 'Houses and Homes', Tolarno, August–September 1988 [FIGURES 1.2, 2.31]. Over this period, he developed a plethora of figurative themes and references, including scenes of inner-city angst, tattooing, cacti, wallpaper, comics and other pop culture sources, drugs and 'psychedelic' imagery, all typically addressed with vivid colour and heavy black outlining [FIGURES 2.17–18, 2.20, 2.28, 3.8, 3.18, 4.22, 4.25, 6.13–15, 4.17]. His first suburban images appear early in this period [FIGURES 2.19, 4.10], and in 1986 he added Tudor houses and villages to his domestic repertoire [FIGURES 1.15–16].

During the 1980s, Arkley became an increasingly prominent contributor to various significant group shows.⁴ His 'Casual Works' show at 200 Gertrude Street (May 1988) and also at the Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane (October 1988) drew attention for the first time to his use of doodles and miscellaneous source material [FIGURES 4.2, 4.23]. In 1987, he married artist Christine Johnson.

1989–94

In 1989, while he was teaching at Moorabbin TAFE, Arkley met Alison Burton, and the two moved in together, living first in St Kilda and then, from 1991 until his death, in outer suburban Oakleigh. She became his main studio assistant during the 1990s, while also developing her own career as an artist.

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In 1991, when Arkley turned 40, Monash University mounted a comprehensive survey show of his work, curated by Jenepher Duncan. Other key developments during this period include the 'Shadow Factory' series (1989–90) [FIGURES 0.1, 1.25–27], an exhibition devoted to heads, faces and masks ('Head Show', Tolarno, October–November 1990) [FIGURES 6.27–30], and his major collaboration with Juan Davila, *Blue Chip Instant Decorator: A Room* (1991–2) [FIGURES 5.10–11]. In 1992, Georges Mora died, and his former assistant Jan Minchin took over at Tolarno.

Between 1992 and 1994, Arkley continued to develop and refine his suburban theme, paying increasing attention to interiors ('Mix 'n Match', Tolarno, October–November 1992 [FIGURES 1.3, 1.18, 1.20, 3.17], and 'Recommended Rooms', Bellas Gallery, Brisbane, May–June 1993) [FIGURE 1.19], and to effects of surface and texture ('Pointillist Suburb' series, Tolarno, November 1994) [FIGURES 2.22–23].

1995–99

1995 was marked by two major exhibitions. 'Downtown' (MOMA at Heide, March–May), explored the urban and suburban imagery of Arkley, Robert Rooney and Ed Ruscha; the show included one of Arkley's recent freeway images [FIGURE 1.32], and a new 'abstract' installation, *Outside-Inside-Out* [FIGURE 2.7]. 'White + Black: 20 Years Work on Paper and Canvas, 1975–1995' (Tolarno, September) [FIGURE 3.10] surveyed Arkley's work in monochrome.

This final period was dominated by suburban imagery, culminating in the large-scale installation *Fabricated Rooms* (1997–99) [FIGURE 1.22], and related works investigating domestic living spaces and their sources (as in 'Sampling', Tolarno, November–December 1998 [FIGURE 2.24]). His style was evolving significantly during these years, with new subtleties in spatial effects, and colour (pastel hues, more frequent recourse to a grey rather than black outline), and increasingly refined use of stencilled patterning, as in *Homezone* (1999) [FIGURE 2.29].

The first exhibition of *Fabricated Rooms* (Art Gallery of New South Wales, November 1997 – January 1998) coincided with the release of Ashley Crawford and Ray Edgar's book, *Spray: The Work of Howard Arkley*.

Arkley's final year saw a frenetic program of commitments and events, including the completion of *Nick Cave* (a commission from the National Portrait Gallery in Canberra) [FIGURE 6.35], his inclusion as Australia's representative at the 48th Venice Biennale (from 13 June 1999), and a one-man show in Los Angeles (Karyn Lovegrove Gallery, July–August 1999) [FIGURES 2.32, 6.36]. Arkley and Burton toured with these shows, also visiting England, Ireland – and Las Vegas, where the two fulfilled a long-standing ambition to marry.

Immediately after returning from overseas, while his Venice and LA exhibitions were still showing, to considerable acclaim, Arkley died suddenly, on 22 July 1999. His funeral was held on 30 July at the Monash University Religious Centre, under the benevolent gaze of his own *Icon Head* [FIGURE 6.30]. Many tributes followed, including these thoughtful remarks, in *Artforum's* 'Best of the '90s' issue, by prominent US critic Dave Hickey:

Arkley's goofy-smart paintings of petty-boo suburban paradise have ranked high on my list of secret pleasures in recent years, and I was looking forward to more. Unfortunately, two weeks after the opening of his first show in LA, Arkley died of an overdose in Australia. The show at Karyn Lovegrove, happily, sadly, was just splendid, at once fresh and austere. *Ars longa, vita brevis*, dammit.⁵

