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BRETT WHITELEY ALCHEMY





BRETT WHITELEY
AUSTRALIA 1939–1992

ALCHEMY 1972–1973
oil and mixed media on wood, 205.8 x 1617 x 3.3 cm overall
Purchased by the NSW state government, 1994, transferred to AGNSW 1998

Brett Whiteley Retrospective, The Art Gallery of New South Wales 16 September – 19 November 1995

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Brett was not schizophrenic, but he was fascinated with the schizophrenic state of mind, in the sense of being split between good and evil – and what did power mean? What was the price to pay? Did it always lead to a dramatic event like Mishima's suicide? He destroyed his portrait of Mishima, joined the remaining panels, and Alchemy just grew from there. There is paradise in hell in it, and all those little details are both humorous and quite frightening. Beautifully drawn, it is like a recipe. All the alchemists had various recipes for going about the transformation. The thing of base metal to gold is the most meaningless bit. More important is the search for the Holy Grail, the connection between heaven and hell, animal and spiritual. This was Brett's recipe. Quite a difficult picture to take in, in one hit. You do have to travel the journey with it.

Wendy Whiteley 1995

Soon after his return to Australia from New York via Fiji in November 1969, Brett Whiteley began to exercise his imagination towards the conception of one of his greatest masterpieces. The multi-panelled *Alchemy*, which he completed in Sydney between early 1972 and January 1973, summarised a myriad accumulation of sources and influences – echoing to an extent *The American dream* realised in New York four years earlier but without its political outrage – manifesting itself finally as an autobiographical journey of gigantic, almost impossible ambition. Everything else Whiteley painted, before and after, can be measured against it.

Spread over eighteen panels, *Alchemy* may be read from right to left as a birth-to-death vision; from elemental earthly existence through startling passages of flesh, fornication and the landscape of the artist's youth, coded along the way with collages of texts, writings, various attachments of *objets trouve*, to the climactic spectacle of a white tentacled sun set against a gold background on panels recycled from Whiteley's recent portrait of Yukio Mishima. This Japanese writer had committed *seppuku* two years earlier, having decided the gap between art and action could only be closed by ritual death. Removing the figurative presence of his original subject, Whiteley projected an idea of Mishima's final vision, as the sword cut into his flesh; a luminescent flash of transmutation into pure abstract spirit of white against gold; and a perfect image for the reductive climax of *Alchemy*.

This left hand side was in fact the starting point of the painting, as Whiteley moved progressively left to right. But the composition can be read either way, even from the centre, where 'IT', a central point which old alchemists referred to as the *Sanctum Regnum* of the Cabala, holds the fulcrum between opposing extremes; between birth and death, between visceral humanity emerging from the cool realms of sea and sky, and the molten gold of transformation.

Completed in the gasworks studio not far from his house on Lavender Bay, *Alchemy* also reflects something of Whiteley's

personal life at that time. The stress of his ambition had gone hand-in-hand with tensions in his domestic life during the painting of *The American dream*, leading to damaging bouts of alcohol abuse. Again he set out to test the capacity for art to influence society, to change it for the better. Entranced, even envious of the power of pop musicians, he dreamt of *Alchemy* touching a mass audience, moving it with esoteric fragments of wisdom gleaned from cursory reading of philosophers, poets and novelists, and the lyrics of popular musicians. This could be a painting, he imagined, that might say it all. But he and his wife Wendy were soon to drift into a life of more dangerous drug usage.

When it was first exhibited at the Bonython Gallery in January 1973, *Alchemy* was accompanied by a catalogue assemblage of images and words from Whiteley's notebooks. Collectively this assemblage fails to make much sense, with quotes from Huysmans, Bacon, Dante, Dylan and many others, mingled with the artist's own aphorisms and anecdotes. However, there are occasional shafts of insight, in his own inimitable language, into the artist's essential process: 'Alchemy is the business of seeing what doesn't exist' he wrote; 'The quest is the transmutation of Self'; 'Most of this painting was first seen with the eyes closed in the pitch of night, awake'; or the often quoted 'Art should astonish, transmute, transfix. Work at the tissue between truth and paranoia'.¹

It seems Whiteley anticipated critics pointing out the connections of his surrealist imagery with the fifteenth-century painter Hieronymus Bosch, writing 'I didn't look at Bosch once while painting any of this... This painting is about my inner paddock, which maybe means that all inner paddocks have similarness.'² There is no doubt, nevertheless, that Bosch played an important part in both *Alchemy* and *The American dream*. On the way back from Morocco in June 1967 Whiteley went to Madrid to see the works of the Flemish master there, and was overwhelmed: 'Incredible! ... What care and such menacing twitching really seen not invented images.' he exclaimed on a postcard.³

An important source was Enid Starkie's biography of Rimbaud, and her account of the French poet's interest in alchemy as necessary to the reconciliation of opposites. Paracelsus, the early sixteenth-century Swiss alchemist intrigued by the possibility of turning base metals into gold, viewed it as a metaphor of the quest for divine transcendence. One idea associated with Paracelsus's theories was the dichotomy between the seen and unseen, relevant to the later phenomenon of Surrealism. But above all, Whiteley drew from these theories an idea of painting as a vehicle by which life could become changed into art, the apparently ordinary into something extraordinary. Through all the rich detail and layers of *Alchemy* this became its singular unifying theme.

Barry Pearce
Head Curator Australian Art

1 Barry Pearce, *Brett Whiteley: Art & life*, Thames and Hudson, London 1995, p 34

2 Statement amongst various papers in the artist's estate

3 Postcard to his mother Beryl Whiteley from Madrid 20 June 1967, possession of recipient, Sydney

4 Enid Starkie, *Arthur Rimbaud*, Faber & Faber, London 1961, p 159 et al

Painting is an argument between what it looks like and what it means.

quote written in Brett Whiteley's studio

SOURCES AND FURTHER READING

Books

- Jung, CG. *The Collected works: Volume twelve, Psychology and Alchemy*, Routledge & Kegan Paul 1968
- McGrath, Sandra. *Brett Whiteley*, Bay Books 1979
- Pearce, Barry. *Brett Whiteley: Art & Life*, AGNSW, Sydney/Thames & Hudson, London 1995
- Starkie, Enid. *Rimbaud*, Faber & Faber, London 1961, New Directions Publishing Corporation

Film

- *Difficult pleasure: Brett Whiteley painter*, Creative Spirits Series I, 51 mins VHS documentary, producer/director: Don Featherstone, Australian Film Institute 1989

Music

- Bob Dylan
- Cream
- Janis Joplin
- Miles Davis
- Tim Buckley
- Leonard Cohen

For further resources, information and programs related to Brett Whiteley and his work see also:

Art Gallery of New South Wales Collection search
www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/collection

The Brett Whiteley Studio website www.brettwhiteley.org

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So much of its content is in the form of words as it is as much a document as a painted collage. The whole of its 350 square feet is crowded with written statements and visual images, all of which must be studied by the spectator if he is to come to terms with it. Perhaps it is an inherent part of this kind of thinking-painting process that the accumulation of significant details should have priority over purely formal considerations. It is essentially an extreme of consciousness and techniques rather than a process of formal structuring.

James Gleeson, *The Sun* 17 January 1973

The painting is a literal autobiography from before the evolution of man and artist in history, through Whiteley's own conception, infancy, schooling and commitment to art ... But besides Whiteley's own life, and besides the alchemist's search for gold, a third main theme is in the picture: Australia's need for Asia.

Daniel Thomas, *The Sydney Morning Herald* 17 January 1973

... Brett Whiteley's world is less modern conceptually than almost any painter painting today. Whiteley's world is that of the mediaevalist. His vision, which is a possible anathema to the disjointed mind of modern man, would have been perfectly understood by any 13th century layman. For it is the world of magic and superstition, sensualism and spiritualism, chaos and order, transmutation and transfiguration – heaven and hell.

Sandra McGrath, *The Australian* 13 January 1973

In alchemy the final achievement of the gold is often taken as a symbol of attaining the vision of God ... In his writing Rimbaud uses many alchemical symbols and metaphors ... He does not, however, use them, as did many alchemists of olden times, to disguise experiments, but rather to give the impression that a mystery exists ... to evoke a state of mind.

Enid Starkie, *Arthur Rimbaud* 1961, p 167

ISSUES FOR CONSIDERATION

Describe your immediate response to *Alchemy*. **Discuss** how the experience of this painting differs when viewed as a reproduction? **Collate** a word and image dictionary that is a record of your response to the work. **Propose** what you believe this painting is communicating.

Alchemy has often been described as a 'self portrait' or a 'mindscape'. **Research** Whiteley's life during the period *Alchemy* was made. Is it an accurate representation of Whiteley's internal and external experiences during this time? **Evaluate** *Alchemy* as both a subjective mirror and objective document of Brett Whiteley. How has Whiteley pushed the definition of portraiture? What role does the audience play in interpreting the meaning of this work? **Discuss**.

Discuss the use of colour and its symbolic nature. **Define** other formal qualities, texts, objects and images that function symbolically. **Investigate** how symbolism is used by artists to represent themselves in self portraits. Why is it no longer enough for many artists in the 20th and 21st centuries to present a self portrait as physical likeness?

Create a self portrait without a physical representation of yourself. **Consider** the events which concern or interest you. Include text, symbols and images which you find important and reflect who you are.

What is symbolism and is it universal? Do symbols change within communities, cultures, and countries? Do they change over time? What symbols exist in *Alchemy*? **Examine** Whiteley's use of signs and symbols and visual references that show his interest in religion and non-European cultures.

Identify the diverse range and use of materials in this work. **Evaluate** how the manipulation of scale activates and engages the viewer both physically and intellectually. **Comment** on how oscillations of scale enable the experience of *Alchemy* to be intimate and personal as well as detached and public simultaneously. **Identify** other polarities of human experience Whiteley manipulates within the work. **Keep** a dream diary and **record** your images and thoughts. **Use** this as a resource to **develop** a body of work. **Consider** each page of your diary as a panel for your artwork. Edit a selection for your final composition.

Research and **define** the word alchemy. **Discuss** the parallels between the role of the alchemist and the artist throughout history. **Speculate** on Whiteley's selection of the word alchemy as his title. **Outline** how the title of this work can equally describe Whiteley's material and conceptual practice.

Develop a body of work, visually describing the journey of transformation from one opposite to another. You may consider hot to cold, dry to wet, life to death, calm to chaos, spiritual to physical, positive to negative. **Arrange** a series of drawings, photographic images, paintings, prints and text that show the journey from one to the other.

Select and **research** one of the personalities of high and popular culture from the early 1970's in this painting: e.g. Bob Dylan, Jane Fonda, Patrick White, Yukio Mishima, Van Gogh, Arthur Rimbaud, Baudelaire and Francis Bacon. How is their inclusion enhance the autobiographical quality of this work?

Analyse how Whiteley responds to his world in *Alchemy*. **Select** one of the following countries and identify their impact on world events during the 1970's: Australia, America, Vietnam, Cambodia, China, Laos and France. **Locate** evidence of this country in the work. **Speculate** Whiteley's point of view.

Evaluate the impact of appropriation on this work. **Locate** references to art movements and creative artists within the painting. What impact did they have on Whiteley's visual vocabulary? How does text play a role in the meaning of this work? Investigate Whiteley's use of text and its significance to Whiteley's art practice. **Select** and **research** one of the following to support your point of view: Australian Landscape traditions, Japanese screens, Surrealism and Pop Art.

Design and **write** a catalogue for this work. **Provide** text from the work and artist and make it visually stimulating. **Outline** the main artistic, literary, philosophic and religious influences on *Alchemy*. **Consider** the function of the catalogue, its audience and their interaction with the original work.

Compare *Alchemy* to *Self Portrait in the Studio* 1976. **Discuss** the similarities and differences? Is there evidence to suggest that his experiences in creating *Alchemy* has influenced his approach to this self portrait?

Research the critical reviews and media responses to *Alchemy* when it was first exhibited. The following opinions are from art critics in January 1973, his first public exhibition of the work. **Select** one, do you agree or disagree? **Write** a review outlining your views of the critics review.

'It must be read as well as looked at.' Nancy Borlase, *The Bulletin* 13 January 1973

'... Whiteley is trying to paint the unsayable, the unspeakable and the intuitive.' Sandra McGrath, *The Australian* 13 January 1973

'It is essentially an extreme of consciousness and techniques rather than a process of formal structure. As such it is Whiteley's most successful venture into large scale think-painting.' James Gleason, *The Sun* 17 January 1973

The following quote is written in Brett Whiteley's Studio: *'Painting is an argument between what it looks like and what it means.'* **Respond** to this assertion? **Compare** it to another artist's approach to painting practise from a similar style and period. **Discuss**.

In *Alchemy*, Whiteley referenced a diverse range of belief systems, cultural constructs and theoretical ideas. **Describe** and **analyse** four of these references in this painting namely: the religious philosophy of Daoism, the psychoanalytic theory of Jungian symbolism and the ideas of Plato and Freud. What impact did these philosophies have on attitudes to creativity in modern western art? Include Brett Whiteley in your **analysis** of relevant artists and art movements.

'Alchemy is a series of juxtapositions which catalogue Whiteley's understanding of the duality of his experiences and dreams'. Do you agree or disagree with this statement? **Provide** examples from this work to support your response.

'Schizophrenia' – How does the popular use of this term differ to the clinical meaning and the post modern use of the term? Is Whiteley an objective observer or a subjective participant? **Discuss**.

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AUSTRALIA 1939–1992

ALCHEMY 1972–73 *panel f, g & h*

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BRETT WHITELEY

AUSTRALIA 1939–1992

ALCHEMY 1972–73 *panel i, j*

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BRETT WHITELEY

AUSTRALIA 1939–1992

ALCHEMY 1972–73 *panel k, 1*

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BRETT WHITELEY

AUSTRALIA 1939–1992

ALCHEMY 1972–73 *panel m, n, o*

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BRETT WHITELEY

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ALCHEMY 1972–73 *panel p, q, r*

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