

JW POWER

&

Interwar Abstraction



5 September 2025

Chau Chak Wing Museum

Presented by The Power Institute,

with support from the Chak Chak Wing Museum

at the University of Sydney

Schedule

Friday, 5 September 2025, Chau Chak Wing Museum, University of Sydney

10:15 – 10:30am	Welcome & introduction Michael Dagostino and Mark Ledbury
10:30 – 11:45am	Lecture Sophie Mathiesson, “JW Power and Biomorphism in Interwar Paris” Introduced by ADS Donaldson
11:45 – 1:00pm	Panel: Bodies and Space-time Chair: Nick Croggon Deborah Barnstone, “The Bizarre Case of Mysticism, the Fourth Dimension, and Colour in Interwar German Art and Architecture” Keith Rathbone, “The Sporting Body in Modern Art: Robert Delaunay, Jean Metzinger, Cycling, and Rugby” Donna West Brett, “László Moholy-Nagy: Shadows and Space-Time”
1:00 – 2:00pm	<i>Lunch</i>
2:00 – 2:30pm	Tour of “JW Power: Art, War and the Avant-garde” (Chau Chak Wing Museum, University of Sydney)
2:30 – 3:45pm	Panel: Colour and Form Chair: Mark Ledbury Rebecca Edwards, “An Australian in Paris: Anne Dangar and cubist exhibitions of the 1930s” Giles Fielke, “Len Lye and the Problem of Popular Films” Anthony White, “Renascences: Italian Abstract Art in the 1930s”
3:45 – 4:00pm	<i>Break</i>
4:00 – 5:15pm	Lecture Kate Kangaslahti, “Abstraction in 1937: A State of the Art” Introduced by Ann Stephen
5:15 – 6:30pm	Reception at Courtyard Café (Holme Building, University of Sydney)

Lecture

“Shape-shifters: JW Power and Biomorphism in Interwar Paris”

The interwar paintings of JW Power, made after his arrival in Paris in 1931, register the emergence of biomorphism within his adopted artistic milieu. The leader of this new, organically-inspired abstraction was Hans (Jean) Arp, who from 1930 had begun to transition from two dimensional to fully three-dimensional sculptural forms. Whereas the profound influence of Piet Mondrian on an international circle of artists in this period has been much studied, the influence of Arp was arguably more pervasive and more elusive. Using insights drawn from a collection of sculptures by Arp now in the collection of the Auckland Art Gallery, this paper argues that while Power never fully embraced the generative spirit and Dadaist logic of Arp's sculpture, he nevertheless valued its symbolic force as a bulwark against theoretical and aesthetic dogmatism, at a time when he was seeking to extricate himself from Cubism, and from his dealer Léonce Rosenberg of the Galerie de l'Effort Moderne.

DR SOPHIE MATTHIESSON has been Senior Curator of International Art at Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki since 2019, where she has curated *Manpower: Myths of Masculinity* (2021) and *Heavenly Beings: Icons of the Christian Orthodox World* (2022 and MONA 2023) and co-curated *The Robertson Gift: Paths through Modernity* (2024). Sophie lectured in art history at the universities of Leeds and Manchester between 1999–2002 and was Curator of International Art at the National Gallery of Victoria from 2006–2019 where her projects included *Modern Britain* (2007), *Salvador Dalí* (2009), *Monet's Garden* (2013), *Degas: A New Vision* (2016) and *Van Gogh: The Seasons* (2017). Sophie has a special interest in interwar modernism and has published on Ben Nicholson, Mondrian and Hans Arp. She is currently preparing an exhibition of Arp's biomorphic sculpture.

Sophie Matthiesson

Panel: Bodies and Space-Time

“The Bizarre Case of Mysticism, the Fourth Dimension, and Colour in Interwar German Art and Architecture”

Spiritism, mysticism, and the occult seem antithetical to modernity and, by extension, modernism, yet all were intertwined with colour theory and use in early 20th century German art and architecture. Russian artist Wassily Kandinsky made this abundantly clear with the title of his influential 1912 book, *On the Spiritual in Art*. The book's central thesis asserts the mystical origins of true artistic expression. Furthermore, Kandinsky asserts that art's purpose is to express an ineffable inner truth, to appeal to the spirit and that to do so, form and colour need to work together. Not only was he convinced that the correct combination of form and colour is critical to creating a successful artwork, but that they are inseparable—the two fundamental components of any spiritual art. Spiritual concerns had special appeal to German artists, and colour seemed to offer the means with which to access the unseen content, the spirit, and the invisible essence of things.

Deborah Barnstone

Artists and architects experimented with colour systems that provided mystical effect, inspired spirituality, and offered access to the invisible spiritual world.

DEBORAH ASHER BARNSTONE is Professor and Head of Architecture at The University of Sydney. She is both a licensed architect as well as an art and architecture historian. Barnstone's primary history research interests are in interrogating the origins of modernism and exploring the relationships between art, architecture, and culture more broadly. She has published widely in journals including *The Journal of Architecture*, *Journal of Architectural Education*, and *The Journal of Art*, along with numerous edited volumes and monographs most recently, *The Color of Modernism: Paints, Pigments and the Transformation of Modern Architecture in 1920s Germany* in 2022 with Bloomsbury Academic.

Keith Rathbone

"The Sporting Body in Modern Art: Robert Delaunay, Jean Metzinger, Cycling, and Rugby"

Historians of sport have since Allen Guttman's *Sport and American Art: From Benjamin West to Andy Warhol* (2011) been increasingly interested in art historical approaches to understanding the cultural relevance of sport in various places, including Australia, England, and France. At the same time, art historians have started to pay more attention to the way that sporting practices influenced art in aesthetic, methodological, and stylistic terms.

The boundary problem between art historians and sports historians seems particularly strange given that many artists were athletes and many athletes were deeply interested in physical culture as an aesthetic experience. In this presentation, I will look at the work of French painters Robert Delaunay and Jean Metzinger through a sporting perspective, trying to better understand how their interest in sports developed and how sport influenced their movement across Neo-impressionism's many disciplines from the fin-de-siècle period and into the postwar.

KEITH RATHBONE (Ph.D., Northwestern University, 2015) researches twentieth century French social and cultural history. His book, entitled *A Sport and Physical Culture in Occupied France: Authoritarianism, Agency and Everyday Life* (Manchester University Press, 2022), examines physical education and sports to better understand civic life under the dual authoritarian systems of the German Occupation and the Vichy Regime. In investigating physical culture, he addresses historiographic issues such as the continuity between the Third Republic and the Vichy Regime, the gendered ideology of Vichy sports programs, and the development of collaboration and resistance.

"László Moholy-Nagy: Shadows and Space-Time"

The vast artistic oeuvre of modernist and Bauhausler László Moholy-Nagy was forged from his desire to render the kinetic elements of light, shadow and motion, or what he referred to as "vision in motion," as a way to see beyond the third dimension. While light was specifically engaged by Moholy-Nagy to render the fourth dimension of space-time, his experiments with the quality of shadows are less studied. This paper considers his use of shadow across a range of media from photograms to film, as a means to image space-time. Moholy-Nagy's interest in picturing space-time as a means to comprehend the fourth dimension, forged a path for modernism across the still and moving image, from the photographic to the cinematic.

DONNA WEST BRETT is an Associate Professor and Chair of Art History at the University of Sydney. She is author of *Photography and Place: Seeing and Not Seeing Germany After 1945* (Routledge, 2016); co-editor with Natalya Lusty, *Photography and Ontology: Unsettling Images* (Routledge, 2019) and with Deborah Ascher Barnstone, *Modernist Aesthetics in Transition: Visual Culture in the Weimar Republic and Nazi Germany* (Bloomsbury, 2024). Brett is Research Leader for the Photographic Cultures Research Group; Editorial Member for the Visual Culture and German Contexts Series, Bloomsbury; a Sloan Fellow in Photography, Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford, 2024, and a 2026 Oliver Smithies Lecturer of Balliol, University of Oxford.

Panel 2: Colour and Form

"An Australian in Paris: Anne Dangar and cubist exhibitions of the 1930s"

In 1930, Australian artist Anne Dangar (1885-1951) made the unexpected and radical decision to move to the artist community Moly-Sabata in rural France to work with Cubist painter Albert Gleizes. Over the next two decades, she developed a distinct practice that synthesised traditional French pottery with abstract decoration informed by his cubist principles.

Dangar's dedication to the Moly-Sabata community is well-documented and, decades after her death in 1951, she continues to form an inextricable component of its history. This paper will instead focus on the circulation and reception of her work in Paris during the interwar period and her engagement with key exponents of abstraction and cubism at this time. By the second half of the 1930s, Dangar's reputation within these artistic circles began to gain momentum and she participated in a succession of important exhibitions in Paris that positioned her alongside the European avantgarde. Among these were the *Exposition Internationale* in 1937 and *Aspect actuel du cubisme chez quelques aînés et quelques jeunes* at the Salon d'automne in 1938. Although Dangar's trajectory was ultimately stymied by the outbreak of the Second World War, as close analysis of the extant archival traces of these exhibitions will demonstrate, Dangar's inclusion not only signalled her acceptance by the avantgarde but her integration into wider histories of French cubism and abstraction.

REBECCA EDWARDS has been Curator of Australian Art at the National Gallery of

Australia, Kamberri/Canberra since 2019 and was curator of the exhibition Anne Dangar, held at the National Gallery in 2024. She has previously held curatorial roles at the National Gallery of Victoria and National Gallery and curated exhibitions and written on various aspects of Australian art. Major projects include cocurating *Colony: Australia 1770–1861* (NGV, 2015) and *Jeffrey Smart* (National Gallery, 2021) and contributing to *Know My Name: Australian women artists: 1900 to now* (National Gallery, 2020 and 2021). She was awarded a PhD in Art History from the University of Melbourne in 2019.

“Len Lye and the Problem of Popular Films”

Whilst living and working with Len Lye in London and Majorca, the expatriate US poet Laura Riding wrote approvingly and supportively about his work as an artist and animator of film, and amongst other things his transatlantic influence on Walt Disney in 1938. Only a couple of years earlier Lye (1901–1980, Christchurch, Aotearoa), had his camera-less abstract film selected for the 4th Venice Film Festival. *A Colour Box* (1935) is significant for its hand-painted frames and innovative use of pre-recorded music by Cuban rumba artists. As a part of the Venice Biennale the world’s oldest film festival was established annually in 1932 by the Italian statesman Giuseppe Volpi, as cinema became a form of propaganda exploitable by fascism. The former Governor of the Italian Libya and then Italian Finance Minister, Volpi turned his focus to the culture industries for its affective popular power. When Lye’s three-minute film—ostensibly an advertisement for the British GPO promoting “cheaper parcel post”—was shown at Venice it was abruptly stopped mid-screening and declared “degenerate art”. What could be so shocking about a three-minute abstract film by a New Zealander who had been living between Spain and England for the previous decade? And was the film only selected to condemn it as the wrong type of propaganda?

This paper emphasises the contestation over, and reception of Lye’s work, by arguing that it must be placed in the broader political context of the period, including early attempts to institute experimental arts such as the Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia in Rome, founded in 1935 by Luigi Freddi and Vittorio Mussolini.

GILES FIELKE is a writer and researcher of film and media art histories. He is a founding editor of *Index Press and Journal*, and *Memo Review*. His most recent project is *Typical Films*, which can be found online at the Art + Australia Study Centre.

“Renaissances: Italian Abstract Art in the 1930s”

In the early 1930s, an Italian group of artists associated with the gallery Il Milione in Milan, including the painter Atanasio Soldati (1896–1953), began looking at works of geometric abstraction being produced in France and Germany for inspiration. During a period when Benito Mussolini’s fascist government was encouraging Italian artists to follow the examples provided by national artistic traditions, this opening toward modernist developments taking place beyond the country’s borders was a radical move. At the same time, the Milione abstractionists identified their painting and sculpture with the work of artists from the pre- and early Renaissance periods of Italian art. They compared the precise lines and flat surfaces of their geometric compositions to the formal rigor and primordial sense of mystery that they perceived in the work of artists like

Giotto di Bondone (c.1267–1337) and Piero della Francesca (c.1415–1492). In this way, they linked abstract art to an indigenous artistic heritage which was in the process of being fundamentally reinterpreted by contemporary Italian art historians. This chapter will show the connections that were being made between modernist and earlier art as Italy was undergoing what has been described as a national “rebirth” in line with fascist cultural policy. As I will demonstrate, during the 1930s abstract artists in Italy like Soldati were drawn to the work of pre- and early Renaissance masters whom they understood as examples of the “primitive within”: both of their time, and out of their time.

ANTHONY WHITE’s research focuses on the history of modern and contemporary art. He is the author of *Italian Modern Art in the Age of Fascism* (2020) and *Lucio Fontana: Between Utopia and Kitsch* (2011), and the co-author of *Variations: A More Diverse Picture of Contemporary Art* (2023) and *Art as Enterprise: Social and Economic Engagement in Contemporary Art* (2016). His writing has appeared in the journals *Grey Room*, *October* and *Third Text*, and in exhibition catalogues published by The Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Musée d’Art moderne de la Ville de Paris.

Lecture

“Abstraction in 1937: A State of the Art”

What was the state of abstract art in 1937? By the end of the interwar period, abstraction—or non-figurative, non-objective or concrete art, as it was also sometimes labelled—had been a recognisable, widely practiced trend in international modern art for nearly three decades. Only the year before, Alfred Barr, director of the museum of Modern Art in New York, had staged his celebrated exhibition *Cubism and Abstract Art*, in which he had designed the history of modern art in the twentieth century as a schema of intersecting and sequential “isms” culminating in non-geometrical and geometrical abstract art. Yet if Barr’s goal was to demonstrate the inevitability of abstract art, even its primacy as the form of modern visual expression, abstraction often still struggled to elicit wider popular interest or admiration. Its audience largely comprised abstract artists themselves and a handful of adventurous dealers, collectors, and art-lovers. The mid-1930s were particularly difficult. On the one hand, abstract art faced ruthless suppression in the two countries in which it had once achieved most recognition. In the Soviet Union, Socialist Realism reigned supreme as the state-mandated form of an intelligible art “for the people”. In Germany, the National Socialist regime was ruthlessly purging its museums of art it condemned as “cultural bolshevism”. The most dramatic public display of that expurgation took place in July 1937 in the so-called *Degenerate Art* exhibition in Munich. On the other hand, the ranks of the avant-garde were themselves rife with conflict. From Paris to New York and elsewhere, the arena of modern art was hotly contested ground in which abstract artists not only vied with their (increasingly successful) Surrealist counterparts but also with each other. Abstract art was the site of an internecine war that pitched those who defended austere geometry against supporters of more organic or “biomorphic” forms.

Despite—because of?—these difficulties, however, the 1930s saw hard-fought consolidation, and 1937 in particular brought clear moments of public success and recognition.

Kate Kangaslahhti

In London, a newly invigorated artistic hub following the recent arrival of European exiles, Ben Nicholson and Naum Gabo published *Circle: International Survey of Constructive Art*, which celebrated the achievements of abstraction and Constructivism in painting, sculpture, and architecture. In the spring, the Swiss artist Sophie Taeuber-Arp and the Dutch De Stijl painter César Domela had presented their first issue of *Plastic/Plastique*, a new trilingual, transatlantic review dedicated to international abstract art. Earlier in January, their work had featured among an impressive selection at the group exhibition *The Constructivists* at the Kunsthalle in Basel. In years past, such shows had often been the work of artists themselves (or their few dealers), but by 1937 abstract art was assuming greater legitimacy in the hallowed space of the public museum, as opposed to the commercialised walls of the private gallery. In the summer, paintings and sculptures by, among others, Constantin Brancusi, Wassily Kandinsky, Paul Klee, Piet Mondrian, Joan Miró, and Australia's own JW Power, appeared in a display at the national museum of the Jeu de Paume in Paris. The French capital was then playing host to the Exposition Internationale. As part of this vast event, the fair-going crowds marvelled at Robert and Sonia Delaunay's grand, abstract mural designs for the Aeronautical and Railway Pavilions and Fernand Léger's technologically-inspired work at the Palace of Discovery. From official patronage to political campaigns of elimination, from popular acclaim to public ridicule and censure: 1937 offers us a unique moment to consider the uncertain state of abstract art towards the end of the interwar period, even as we also find the seeds of its triumph after 1945, when abstraction became a cultural symbol of freedom and democracy.

KATE KANGASLAHTI is a research fellow with the research group Cultural History since 1750, a senior lecturer in the Institute for European Culture and Society, and co-director of MDRN, a research lab for literary and cultural studies, all at KU Leuven. She studied art history, French and German at the University of Melbourne, and received her PhD in the History of Art from the University of Cambridge. Before moving to Belgium, she worked in the Department of Prints and Drawings at the British Museum in London, and as an Assistant Professor in the College of Humanities, Art and Social Sciences at NTU in Singapore. She is a series editor for the book series *European Avant Garde and Modernism Studies* (De Gruyter), and currently working on a project studying transnational networks of abstract artists in the 1930s.

Exhibitions

"JW Power: Art, war and the avant-garde"

Curated by Ann Stephen and ADS Donaldson
19 July - 8 February 2026
Chau Chak Wing Museum, University of Sydney

The Sydney-born painter J.W. Power is Australia's most accomplished artist of the inter-war years. In London and Paris in the 1920s and '30s, his unique blend of cubism, surrealism and abstraction found an audience in the heart of the avant-garde.

In the first comprehensive survey of his work, this exhibition chronologically follows Power's development through portraiture, landscape, figures, still-life and abstraction.

JW Power Satellite Exhibitions: "An Artist's Archive" and "Preparatory Studies"

Curated by Ann Stephen
Until February 2026
Level 3, Fisher Library and
Schaeffer Library, The Power Institute, RC Mills Building
University of Sydney

Two exhibitions of JW Power's personal sketches, notebooks and letters (held in the Library's Rare Books and Special Collections), alongside items loaned from Chau Chak Wing Museum and Archives.

"Big Power Energy"

Curated by Katrina Liberiou
26 July - 8 February 2026
Chau Chak Wing Museum, University of Sydney

Since its founding in 1967, the Power Collection has been inspirational for generations of Australasian artists. In the University of Sydney's 175th anniversary year we have invited 14 artists to each select a work from the Power Collection and to reflect on their choice.

The invited artists include Serwah Attafuah, Christopher Bassi, Richard Bell, Megan Cope, Léuli Eshrāghi, Narelle Jubelin, Shivanjani Lal, Lindy Lee, Archie Moore, Ramesh Mario Nithiyendran, Leyla Stevens, Angela Tiatia, Imants Tillers and Ben Quilty.

This exhibition takes inspiration from the visionary bequest of J.W. Power, by focusing on works that are either physically monumental or conceptually bold. Many of the works have not been displayed for more than 30 years, and some are returning favourites.



JW Power, Tête, 1920-40, Chau Chak Wing Museum, PW1961.106