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Murmurs of Mr. Johnston: Rosslynd Piggot and the Johnston Collection



by Inga Walton

William Robert Johnston (1911-86) was an antique dealer, art collector and aesthete who ran his principal business, Kent Antiques, in High Street, Armadale from 1971 until his death. He acquired the East Melbourne property Cadzow (1860) in 1952, remodelling it to create the appearance of a late eighteenth century Georgian-style townhouse, and renamed it Fairhall. Johnston left the property and its contents to the people of Victoria as a small house-museum, "a place of historical and educational interest", as he put it. An independent charitable Trust was established in 1986 to preserve and develop this unique collection, expressive of one man's personal taste and love of fine objects. The Johnston Collection formally opened to the public on November 19th, 1990.

Born in Lilydale, the only child of Robert Alexander Johnston, a boot-maker, Johnston's young life was transformed when he was around eight years-old. His maternal grandmother, Mary Theresa Friedrichs, presented him with a Minton teacup (c.1812-15), but without the saucer. That London shape cup, with its delicate 'chicken bone' handle, remains in the Collection today and is regarded as one of its most treasured pieces. This gift could be said to have inspired the course of Johnston's life; collecting would become both his passion and his business. Or, to put it more romantically, perhaps Johnston embarked on a life-long quest to reunite his little cup with the elusive missing saucer?

At fourteen, Johnston left school and secured work as a window dresser at the fashionable Melbourne department store Buckley & Nunn (acquired by its rival David Jones in 1982). In March, 1947, Johnston departed for England intending to establish a career in antiques dealing there. He soon discovered the extent to which the privations of World War II had diminished the country and rent a hole in the existing social fabric. After speculatively knocking on the doors of several country houses, Johnston found that the landed gentry, faced with new post-war taxes and maintenance costs, were disposed to discreetly sell their antiques to a willing buyer. Johnston initially established himself in a three-storey shop in Greenwich and began to ship the goods back to Australia in container loads, later moving his operations to a larger warehouse.

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by Inga Walton

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In 1972, Johnston suffered a heart attack, an event that gave him pause to consider the future of his already sprawling and beloved collection. It was at this time he spoke to a solicitor friend, John Rogan, about bequeathing it to the State, which raised the issue of finding a permanent home in which to display it. This was undoubtedly the motivation for Johnston's decision to return to Melbourne permanently, and gradually transfer his Greenwich collection to *Fairhall*. A gardening enthusiast, Johnston also acquired the country property *Chandpara* (an Urdu word meaning 'Silver Home'), an 800 acre property and stud at Tylden near Woodend, in 1977. Formerly the residence of Dr. Arnold Caddy (1866-1948), the property in many ways fulfilled Johnston's aspirations towards the English country-house ideal, and the bucolic lifestyle he wished to emulate as the gentleman-in-residence.

Johnston greatly enjoyed the process of decorating and re-dressing within his properties over the years, arranging little feature corners and vignettes, as he did at Kent Antiques. He reputedly sold many items from *Fairhall* informally, as the genteel domestic setting helped clients imagine the objects in their own home. Ever the savvy businessman, if Johnston had something he thought would suit a particular collector, that person might well be invited to dinner, and a sale negotiated. This spirit of interpretation and change Johnston enjoyed about his collection remains a central tenet of how it is administered today; not as a static or moribund group of objects, but as a dynamic assemblage. Over the years a number of individuals with similar professions and interests to Johnston and his circle have been invited to bring their own responses to *Fairhall* and the Collection. Of those, Laurie Carew OAM, the former visual merchandising manager at the original 'Georges' store (which closed in 1995), and fellow antiques dealer Francis Dunn were Johnston's friends.

These days, The Johnston Collection program divides the year into three distinct periods and themes. 'Mr. Johnston and his Collection' (March-June) invites a guest arranger who works only with the permanent collection, these have included Primrose, Lady Potter, AC, Lynne Landy (wife of the former Governor of Victoria John Landy), interior designer Caroline Touzeau, and theatre designer Shaun Gurton. 'The House of Ideas' (July-October) asks a guest curator to work within *Fairhall* who may bring in other items, or introduce new ways of working with or seeing the Collection, and 'to make old new again'. The series aims to attract new audiences to the venue, and recent participants such as fashion designers Akira Isogawa (2010), Luke Sales and Anna Plunkett (of *Romance Was Born*), and architect Pascale Gomes-McNabb (both 2012) have certainly raised its profile. The annual 'Christmas at The Johnston Collection' (November-February) engages creatives from around Victoria who work to produce pieces based on Johnston's life and collection.

"The premise of 'Mr. Johnston and his Collection' is evocative, and the 'House of Ideas' can be assumed to be a bit more provocative in its response to the Collection. We perceive that our role as a museum is to encourage audiences to think about and see objects in new ways", agrees Louis Le Vaillant, Director of the Collection since late 2008. "To continually think about the Collection and collecting, to think about versions of the past, versions of the present and of the future, to honour the practices, techniques and styles of the past while also anticipating and embracing progress and development". The latest installment of the 'House of Ideas' sees Melbourne artist Rosslynd Piggott curate the Collection, which she has titled *Murmur* (until 23 October, 2013). "Rosslynd has a well-established and well-developed history of working collaboratively with numerous artists and galleries and responding to site-specific locations. She brought that carefully honed approach to The Johnston Collection", says Le Vaillant.

Piggott first visited the Collection to see Akira Isogawa's installation, "The rooms and the house were absolutely beautiful and the visit rather transforming. I felt I had been transported to a kind of other space and time. This feeling stayed with me for days. I am very interested in this kind of immersive space, whether it be a house, a room, an object, a film, a flower display, a painting or an experience", she remarks. Piggott's process of familiarising herself with the Collection and its history has been in-depth over the past two years, "I was able to drop in quite regularly to view rooms, objects, walk through the spaces and talk with both Louis and [assistant curator] Angela Hesson ... I made one visit to the off-site storage facility [in the grounds of Government House]. First, I had to have a conceptual framework in place and then much of the selection of key objects was done with Angela and Louis' help. Lots of going from room to room, looking in cupboards – all that fascinating hunting – I was able to choose every object in this installation and in most cases able to handle and place [them] in a very exact way".

Although The Johnston Collection was not devised to offer a biographical testament to its owner, Piggott's approach differs from past curators in that she has been less preoccupied with the 'objects' per se, and more concerned with how various pieces might express aspects of the personalities who lived with and enjoyed them over the years within a domestic setting. "As I was reading [writer] Sylvia Black's [as-yet-unpublished] history *William Johnston: A Decorative Life*, I became more interested in the lives of the men who had lived at *Fairhall*", Piggott explains. "When you work with the physical and emotional resonance of objects that have been a part of lives, placement and associations are a very important part of bringing a



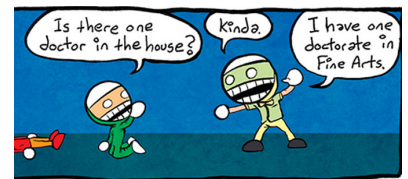
In this **SPECIAL EPISODE** of *Deep Trouble* we interview **Charles Firth of the Chaser**. He offers an analysis of the state of play for the major parties in 2019, why the Labour Party lost the 'unlosable' election, as well as ...

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Ive Sorocuk – Comics Face Supreme

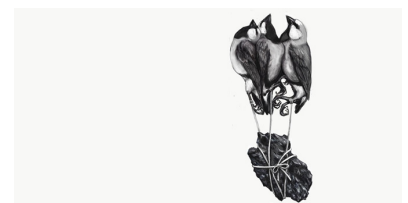
Trouble met Ive Sorocuk at the same comic con called Supanova in 2008 where they met Mandy Ord. We were immediately attracted to his weird sense of humour, his superheroes, *The Diggables*, and ...

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Bob's Convoy

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by Ben Laycock

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SALON April-May 2019

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new energy and new insights into a collection. This is a very subtle, complex and engaging process ...”

Piggott has dedicated a number of the rooms to their principal former occupants, using archive photos and other visual aids to convey what the experience of life at *Fairhall* might have been like. “One of the biggest challenges was attempting to deal with the delicacy of the emotional layers of the history ... each room is very dense in such association”, she admits. “The next was visualising the spaces. I did not start with empty spaces. Every time I visited there was another tour [of the residence]. So I needed to look at the spaces and objects, somehow obliterating them and beginning with my own possible versions. This really messed with my head ... I mean lots of sleepless nights. I often worked at 4am ... The thinking about this is constant, and yet some of the most important moves happened during the install week”.

Johnston had a substantial property portfolio and owned as many as thirty-six rental properties in the East Melbourne area. Following his acquisition of *Fairhall*, Johnston had the interior converted into three rental flats, and one of the first tenants was set and costume designer Angus Winneke (1911-82). Winneke worked for the Tivoli Theatre, and his archive is preserved as part of the Performing Arts Collection at the Arts Centre, Melbourne. He would also work part-time at Kent Antiques when Johnston was overseas, bringing his visual flair to the displays. Winneke moved from *Fairhall* in 1966 to another Johnston property around the corner in Gipps Street, where he lived until his death. The Yellow Drawing Room upstairs has been arranged as Winneke’s domain with facsimiles of his costume sketches and stage designs on the walls and tables, along with photos of the productions, and a black and white head-shot of the man himself displayed on a coffee table.

Former Director of the Collection (2000-08), the late Nina Stanton, undertook substantial research into Johnston’s life and movements. According to her chronology, in 1963 Johnston went on a buying trip to Egypt where he met his future colleague and companion Ahmed Moussa Abo el Maaty. In 1965, Moussa spent his school holidays working in the Greenwich warehouse, and later visited Melbourne with Johnston for three months in 1968. In 1976, three years after Johnston had returned to Melbourne to live, Moussa relocated to Australia permanently to become his assistant, and *Fairhall* became their main abode until Johnston’s death. “The connections between the three men have indeed been very close, tender and helpful in each others lives... It seemed they made their own ‘family’, loved, protected and cared for each other, in a way that was productive for all of them”, Piggott relates. “I wanted to honour these emotional connections, the role of devotion, perhaps more than the objects, as these had not been spoken about so much, and were such a vivid and important part of Johnston’s history and success. At the same time, I did not want to spell this out. Gentle, respectful and even subliminal communication through the images was very important”.

Piggott produced a number of new works in response to the Collection, including *Splinter-Garden* (2012-13) a loop of filmed footage of flowers in the garden at *Fairhall*. This is projected onto the ceiling of the Green Drawing Room through an English glass chandelier (c.1820), reputedly acquired by Johnston from the Maharajah of Tagore during a buying trip to India. “I have worked with a projected image of a chandelier in a past installation, *Palace* (1990). It belonged to antiques dealer Graham Geddes who allowed me to photograph an extraordinary chandelier made from uncut crystal; such a mysterious and beautiful object. I projected it (larger than life) onto suspended gauze, so it appeared to hover and sway in the darkened gallery space”, Piggott recalls. “Johnston’s nineteenth century piece is made of cut crystal, so it became an excellent device for shattering light, being projected images of his magnolia and ice camellias”.

A series of nine digital prints, also titled *Murmur* (2013), range throughout the property, providing an almost ghostly counterpoint to the physical objects they represent. “[These] were made as a result of looking through the Collection archives. I came across rather beautiful large-scale negatives of the interiors of *Fairhall* under the first directorship [of Judith Thompson, 1989-91]. These interiors were very ordered and classical. Louis gave me permission to use these negatives to produce new work. The layering of these images produced surprising new spaces that are akin to layers of memory, floating time and space”, Piggott comments. She also found points of common ground with Johnston’s love of mirrors and reflective surfaces, and has hung some of her earlier works in the White Room, and upstairs in the Study, and Sitting Room. “I have long enjoyed glass and mirrors, particularly those that do not reflect perfectly. I have included some of my own double mirrors in the house made by slumping glass, they appear molten and fluid, as a way of emphasising connections between seeing and sensing, presence and absence”.

Johnston’s collection of paintings includes two important works he acquired from the Kimbolton Castle sale in 1949, the family seat of the Earls and later Dukes of Manchester from 1615. One work, by Mary Beale (1632-99), a former student of the court painter Sir Peter Lely (1618-80) depicts a lady of the Montagu family (1683). This is possibly Lady Anne



APRIL/MAY 2019 COVER: Richard NGUYEN, *All mixed up* (detail)
2018, digital video, duration 1:57 min. Canning Vale College. *Pulse Perspectives*, Art Gallery of Western Australia, Perth Cultural Centre, Perth (WA), 6 April – 22 July 2019 – artgallery.wa.gov.au

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Getting Personal with Vince Jones

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interview by Steve Proposch

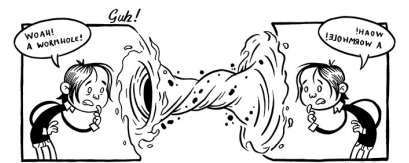
Vince Jones remembers playing in the Wollongong under 10s soccer team. “I was born in Paisley, just outside of Glasgow. My dad ran out of steam for Scotland at the time. He wanted to go somewhere ...

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Happy Birthday Comics

April 6, 2019 | [troublemag](#)



Trouble turned 15 in April 2019, and for our birthday issue we wanted to thank by way of featuring some of our past comic contributors, who have been a highlight for us throughout the years. Many of these beautiful and ...

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Montagu (c.1667-1720), eldest daughter of Robert Montagu, 3rd Earl of Manchester (1634-83), who became the third wife of James Howard, 3rd Earl of Suffolk (1606/7-88) in early 1682. The other painting, attributed to Robert Peake, the Elder (c.1551-1619), depicts Edward Montagu, 1st Baron Montagu of Boughton (1563-1644), an English politician whose career spanned three monarchs from Elizabeth I to Charles I, whose cause he supported in the Civil War, and which led to Montagu dying a prisoner at the Savoy Hospital. Piggott has hung this 1601 work in the Blue Room, along with a view of *Alva House, Shropshire, The Seat of J. R. Johnstone Esq* (c.1800), attributed to either Patrick (1787-1831) or Alexander Nasmyth (1758-1840). The work was part of what might be called Johnston's personal myth-making; he apparently used to stand in front of the painting, allowing people to assume that the property had family associations. A portable oval-framed oil portrait of Johnston's mother, Mary Louise Freidrichs, with a bronze surround featuring an oak leaf and acorn wreath design sits nearby.

Other paintings, Piggott was less enamoured of, "Since I am a painter, I found it difficult to retain any paintings that I didn't like! Johnston had many portraits of noblemen, landowners etc, that I had to turn to the wall", she quips. A charming work by Joseph Highmore (1692-1780) of a lady of the Beaumont family, *Untitled (Portrait of a Young Lady with Roses)* (c.1740) was probably also acquired by Johnston in 1949. Piggott has draped gauze over the sitter's face, "In shrouding the ... painting I had simply wanted to emphasise the beautiful gesture of the hands and the rose. It may have been a symbolic gesture to indicate the pregnancy of the woman. Since this painting hangs in Ahmed's sitting room, I had wanted to emphasize the image, as a gift to Ahmed", she confides. "It also makes some nice connections in this room to the Bohemian glass light stand that is decorated with roses and a beautiful photograph of a young Ahmed carrying a bunch of gorgeous garden roses".

This desire to articulate the unspoken through objects and images permeates *Murmur*, speaking to us softly of a man who strived for graciousness and beauty in his life, and of his friends who shared it. "Rosslynd's response, while of course loaded with her strong visual sense of place and object, was more extraordinary for her sensibility of person and recalling of the past of the people who had, through our museum practice been written out. So, the opportunity to curate that narrative through archives, items and her interventions was exceptional for us and indeed our audiences", Le Vaillant believes. For the artist who has been immersed within Johnston's world so intensely, there is a sense that the experience will continue to linger, "The possibility to work with an entire house and its collection was totally beguiling. To have the opportunity to work with a collection in a very close and intimate way is a special and rare privilege ... working with The Johnston Collection to make *Murmur* has been an extraordinary experience ...", Piggott reflects. "Strange and challenging, as the task has hovered in an unfixed zone, somewhere between historical interpretation and installation. I do enjoy such unfixed zones; fragile and risky".

The Johnston Collection, can be visited by booking at – johnstoncollection.org

Rosslynd Piggott is represented in Victoria by Sutton Gallery, Fitzroy – suttongallery.com.au

Artist site – rosslyndpiggott.com

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by Inga Walton

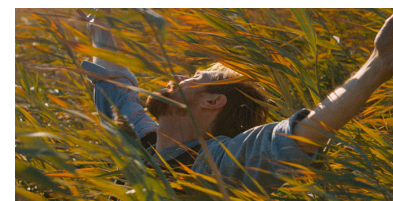
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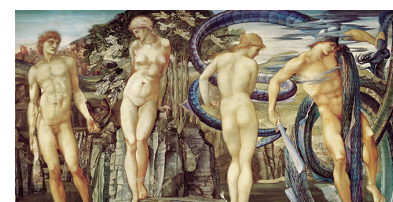
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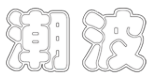
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