

# Rivers and Roads: Charles and Ashley Cooper

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HAWKESBURY REGIONAL GALLERY





Front/back cover: Charles Cooper *Hillside with shadow, Colo* 1994 watercolour on paper 46 x 65cm courtesy the artist  
Inside front cover: Charles Cooper *Colo River* (detail) 1998 watercolour 20 x 36cm courtesy the artist



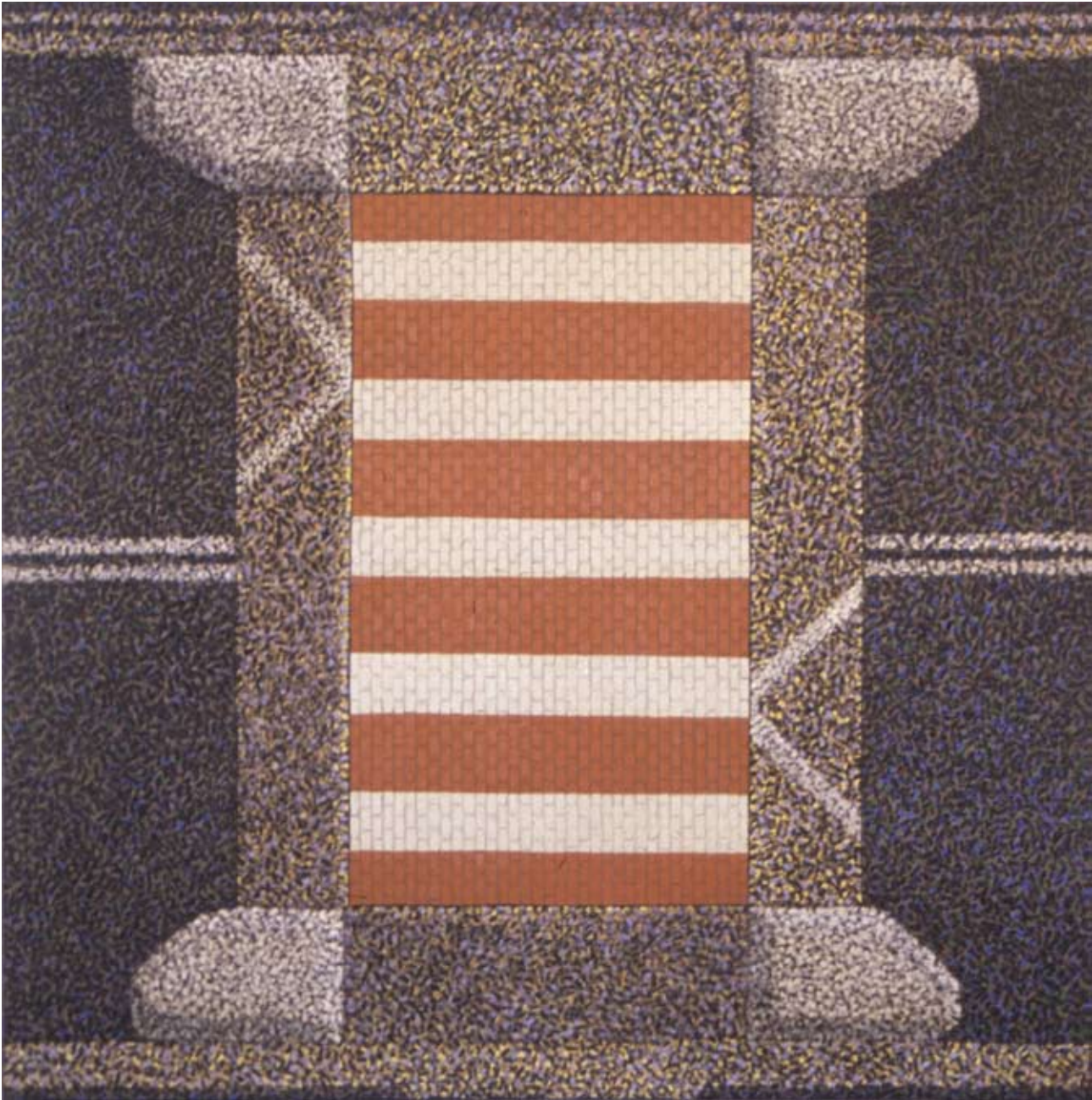
Charles Cooper *Colo River* 1998 watercolour 20 x 36cm courtesy the artist

## Rivers and Roads: Charles and Ashley Cooper

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7 MAY – 4 JULY 2010





Charles Cooper *Lawson Street* 1994 oil on linen 122 x 122cm private collection, Sydney

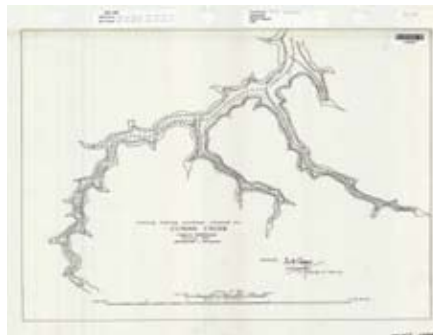
## Charles and Ashley Cooper: Rivers and Roads

One of the important roles of a public gallery is to celebrate the cultural heritage of the region. The work of both Charles and Ashley Cooper gives us a generational understanding of the landscape of the Hawkesbury and beyond, as well as providing insight into artistic change and development over time. Both artists have had a long association with the Hawkesbury region and the Colo River, as well as the Central Tablelands region of NSW. For this reason it is fitting that the Orange Regional Gallery will be taking the exhibition in September.

Ashley Cooper was one of the founding members of the Macquarie Towns Art Society, and there are many people in the region who remember his input and passion for art, and who have been influenced by his presence in the region. As his descendant, Charles Cooper has been fortunate to have not only a familial, but physical connection to his grandfather by inheriting a property on the Colo River - a tract of hillside and bushland with river access. This piece of landscape is quintessentially Australian and resonates through both artists work.

The juxtaposition of the two artists in this exhibition gives an unexpected insight into changes in approach and attitude of artists over the past century. It seems unlikely that Ashley would have ever created the large-scale abstracted images that Charles has developed, or that Charles would draw the classically detailed studies of Ashley. It is really only by exhibiting the two together that connections can be made and it is with great pleasure that the Hawkesbury Regional Gallery can exhibit these two fine artists' in this exhibition 'Rivers and Roads'.

Kathleen von Witt  
Director  
Hawkesbury Regional Gallery



## The Road: Landscape and Allegory

*One night, I dreamed I was locked in my Father's watch  
With Ptolemy and twenty-one ruby stars...<sup>1</sup>*

Through his conceptual journeying and love of paint, Charles Cooper considers the vastness of the Australian landscape and beyond. Cooper's artistic roots are in landscape painting, much like his grandfather Ashley Cooper, a painter of the Hawkesbury and Colo River region.<sup>2</sup> Yet it also seems to me that Cooper has been influenced significantly by his father Anthony Cooper, who directed surveying and chartmaking in the Australian Navy during the 1960s<sup>3</sup>.

Charles Cooper's mark-making gains much of its aesthetic appearance from maps and satellite imagery. Art historian and theorist Svetlana Alpers<sup>4</sup>, writing on Dutch art, draws our attention to the fact that, during the seventeenth century, charts and maps, as decorative items and as descriptions of property or empire, were assigned the same status as paintings:

The reach of mapping was extended along with the role of pictures, and time and again the distinctions between measuring, recording, and picturing were blurred.<sup>5</sup>

For the past twenty-five years, Cooper's imagery has drawn on such ideas, as well as his consideration of European and indigenous Australian modes of representing the landscape. Pedestrian crossings, roundabouts and speed-bumps, those familiar sculptured forms with their weathered, painted lines, are rendered as symbolic, generic sites. The images of these points of human interaction then become everyman's view and portals for projecting the confluences of Australia's varying narratives about itself. Each image relates to a coordinate on the greater map of Australia. Cooper's series *Refuge Island*, the general title of his body of work since 1993, has begun to form a patterning of country, from bush to metropolis. He revels in looking at sea charts that describe coastlines and submarine contours (in which he sees a comparison with "what's under the surface of the paint"<sup>6</sup>). His abstractions of common meeting places and slow-down spots in the vehicular landscape of the urban fringe reveal subtly varied patterns and textures, which create overall and unified diagrammatic images. He paints the very shallow space of road surfaces with short calligraphic dashes or directional dots and embedded scratches or grooves, often echoing the rhumlines or compass roses characteristic of early sea charts. His artwork poetically references the junctures and disjunctures, ocean voyages, ancestral trails and night skies of the Australian cultural landscape, responding sensitively to postcolonial narratives.

Although Cooper references modernist abstraction, his *Refuge Island* paintings nonetheless relate to

particular locations and moments in time. In 1985, he created *Uluru*, a painting of a white dash on the contentious pathway to the summit of the iconic tourist attraction. In the *Lawson Street* paintings 1994 -7, using a bird's-eye view of a former 'pedestrian plateau' at Sydney's Redfern station, Cooper objectively presents another controversial site, before and after it was razed by State authorities to limit confrontations between pedestrian and driver. These sites, one rural, one urban, contain memories of a differently emergent Australia around the time of its bi-centennial in 1988. Within a painterly framework, Cooper's sensitivities and rigorous workmanship parallel an intellectual desire to evoke contemporary aspects of Australia's evolving national story.

There is a lack of sentiment in the work of the two artists: one pre-modernist, the other distinctly post-modernist. Charles Cooper has sited his *Refuge Island* paintings as an urban planner, architect or mapmaker, in plan view. By contrast, in his *Colo Hillside* paintings of the 1970s and 80s, he employs a conventional elevation view of the landscape, but with a high horizon, often removing the skyline and foreground altogether to flatten the picture plane and subtly disturb the observer's relative viewpoint. Such an intense frontality can be seen to signify that actual, and psychological, vertical barrier confronting early Sydney explorers: the Great Dividing Range (close to the Cooper family residence in the foothills of the Blue Mountains). Certainly Cooper's oeuvre displays a startlingly original approach to the portrayal of the contemporary Australian landscape and psyche, at the same time reflecting those of his father and grandfather to the Hawkesbury/Colo River region and Sydney's urban growth. Contemporary theorists such as Alpers can help guide the viewer into an appreciation of an artist in whose work we see the "transformation of a mapping mode into landscape representation."<sup>7</sup> Cooper's mesmerizing surfaces of coloured layers and calligraphic marks embody a landscape vision with narrative possibilities.

Regardless of how a viewer may experience Cooper's contemporary imagery or might, indeed, identify his work with that of his family progenitors, his paintings give pause for thought. They put us in slow motion, then subtly confront our views of Australia's intercultural past and future. Charles Cooper's beautiful handiwork invites us to consider a somewhat disturbing question, 'What's next and how will we manage it?'

Lycia Trouton March 2010  
University of Tasmania, Launceston

#### Endnotes

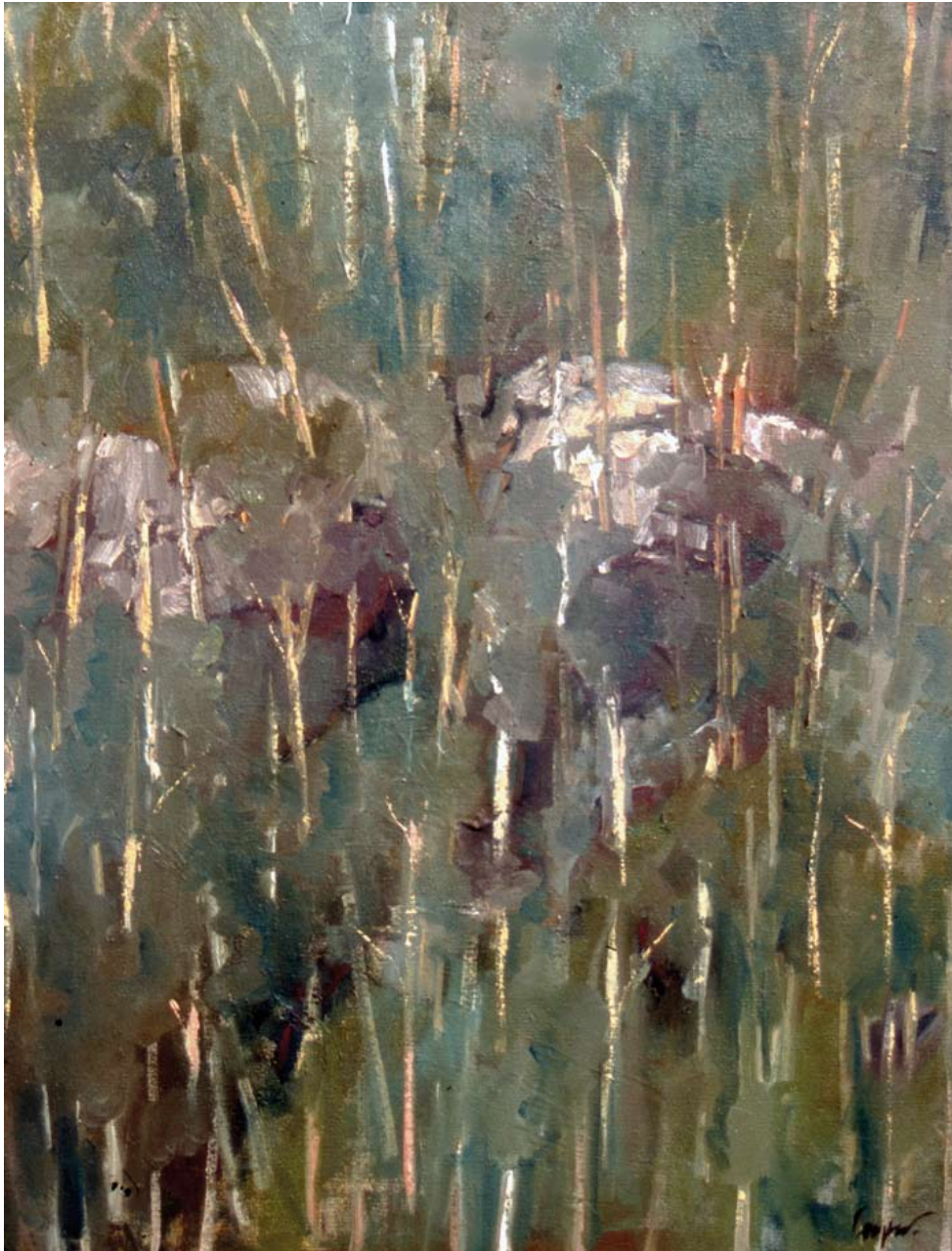
<sup>1</sup> John Ciardi. *From Time to Time*. New York: Twayne Publishers Inc., 1951. Print. <sup>2</sup> Interview with the Artist 21st May 2008. <sup>3</sup> Commodore A. H. (Tony) Cooper was Hydrographer of the Royal Australian Navy 1962-6 and 1967-8. <sup>4</sup> Svetlana Alpers. *The Art of Describing: Dutch Art in the Seventeenth Century*, University Of Chicago Press, 1984. 136. Print. <sup>5</sup> Alpers. 134-5. <sup>7</sup> Alpers. 139.





Charles Cooper *Snake track (Hawkesbury)* 1986 oil on canvas 92 x 122cm courtesy the artist





Charles Cooper *Hillside, Colo River* 1975 oil on linen 66 x 50.5cm courtesy the artist

## River and Roads

Visual art is always, at some level, about the act of looking. The patterns of line and colour and shape that come to us as pictures, printed or framed on a wall, inevitably bear a direct relationship to the artist's experience of looking. This holds just as true for images that are conjured out of the imagination. It's always at base about seeing, about how we see and how we might see.

If we look long and hard enough, we might in our own imaginations follow the trail back, gumshoe-like, to the very places the artist visited, and set the scenes for ourselves. What day of the week was it? Who else was around? What was the weather like? How did the place sound that day, how did it smell? What other stuff was on the artist's mind? Maybe big questions about nature and appearance and images, or maybe more immediate concerns like whether to go get a sandwich and a cup of tea or perhaps something more bracing. We might ask too how the artist managed to set the time aside – was he or she on a paid job, or was the picture done in time carefully scrimped and saved from the workaday routine? Was the picture done in a state of leisurely contemplation or was it hard graft? The hints and clues are all there in the work.

Ashley Cooper was an active and dedicated artist, part of a community of landscape artists, art teachers and professional illustrators in early twentieth century Sydney. He made a decision early on not to give up his day job as a clerk at the Australian Gaslight Company (a good job – AGL was a big employer). So his art was mostly a spare time pursuit, albeit an energetic and deeply felt one. The places he went, the subjects he rendered, when taken together offer a compelling record of his own close reading of Sydney and its surrounds. To spend time with Ashley Cooper's drawings then is to vicariously inhabit his world, maybe even think his thoughts.

Like a number of observant souls of his day, Ashley Cooper saw in inner Sydney a deeply rustic, almost medieval quality: the houses, walls, storehouses, cobbled streets and stairways built from soft Sydney sandstone, although less than a century old, had by his time assumed a deeply worn and weathered look. Likewise timber and iron wharves, sheds, fences, cranes, gantries and outbuildings after just a few years exposure to the intense Sydney weather had become enticingly ramshackle and rustic. Another element in the mix: escarpments, outcrops, gullies and drop-offs leading to the water's edge, maybe





Charles Cooper *Dusk, Bawley Point* 1989 watercolour & pencil on paper 27.5 x 38cm courtesy the artist

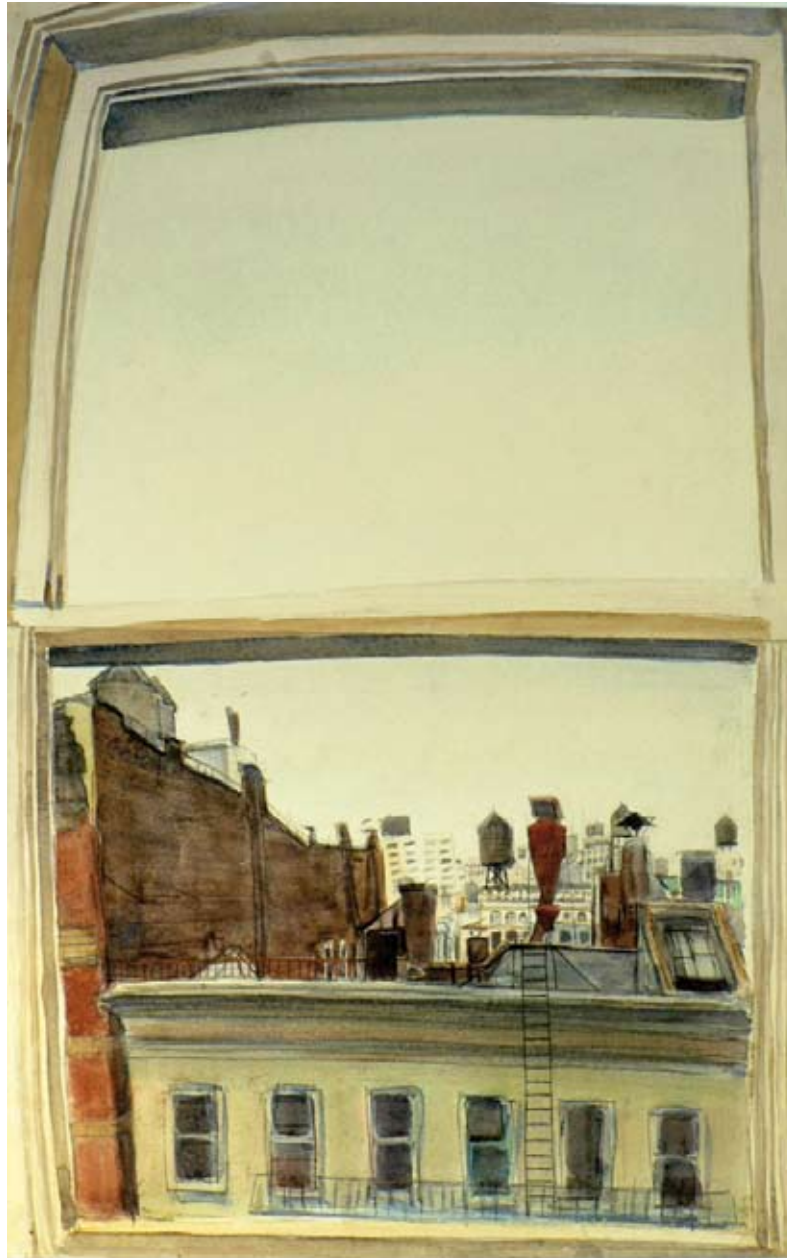
with a glimpse of silver water in the distance, presented the artist-flaneur with intriguing vertical possibilities. One reason that Sydney's art community of the twenties fell so in love with the Harbour Bridge works: soaring modernity and tumbledown rusticity were there, cheek by jowl in any single glance. And indeed, that's why the visible traces of the industrial built environment were so central to artists like Ashley Cooper. They looked good.

The wanderings of the serious weekend artist were shaped by the networks of bus and rail routes which tracked out from the Sydney periphery. The lagoons and lakes of the near Central Coast, the Blue Mountains directly to the west, the grazing land to the southwest, the hazy rurality of Kangaroo Valley, the robust cliff-face textures of Wollongong and the south Coast, all were sensitively scoped by Cooper.

The big elbow in the Nepean-Hawkesbury River system, where it twists away from its generally northerly path to eventually head south-east back to the sea held a particular attraction to Ashley Cooper. Here were found a dramatic range of landscape modes and subjects: a distinctly Australian (rather than faux-English) agricultural countryside, pleasing lines offered by river and billabong, the signs of everyday industrial life (the Hawkesbury-Nepean River was an important commercial transport route then) contrasting with a vast wilderness to the north and west. And rising immediately behind the main river, the mysteries of the Colo River gorges. It was here, on a bend of the lower Colo that Ashley Cooper eventually settled, and where decades later grandson Charles would pursue his own artistic investigations.

The particular conjunction of languid, predominantly horizontal shapes of the river set against steep verticals of escarpment, outcrops, she-oaks and sclerophyll forest presents tricky technical problems and particular opportunities to the landscape artist. On the one hand the anarchic, unpredictable forms of the Australian bush offer much to be going on with, a new world of fresh, non-clichéd visual shapes. But at the same time, the profound unlikeliness of those forms (to the old world eye) threatens always to sabotage any attempt at representation: get just a little too abstract and you've lost it. The same goes for the colours and tones which change so wildly during the course of any day, from the dull grey-green shapeless gloom which early settlers found so melancholy-inducing, to the bleached-out, shadowless glare of the midday landscape, to the fiery slashes of late afternoon light glancing off sandstone and tree





Charles Cooper *Large window, Broadway, N.Y.C.* 1994 watercolour on paper 100 x 64cm courtesy the artist

trunks. These wilderness vistas rarely assemble themselves into easily picturesque compositions. The problem here always is, just how the hell do you render that into colour and line in two dimensions?

It's fascinating to compare how Charles Cooper, Ashley's grandson, addresses precisely these problems, in some cases using the very same views. We can see here Charles pushing the representation to the point that the arrangement of identifiable, name-able shapes and objects threatens to dissolve into pure abstraction. There's a good-natured game going on between artist and viewer: look at, say, the pattern of silhouetted tree trunks in the watercolour *Colo Shadow* – Charles asks us to forget trees and earth, see the it just as pattern and shape. It's a pleasing switch for us. Go from that to say, *Colo hillside, 1975*, or *Colo hillside, 1980*. Yes, we get it – tree trunks on a near vertical drop-off, seen from the opposite side of the gorge, lit by brilliant sunlight. But it's becoming a pattern of pale verticals against greens and greys, both light and deep, which have little to do with our stock mental images of 'tree' and 'hillside'. *Colo hillside in rain*, and *Colo hillside in sun* offer other takes on the same outlook, and verge even nearer to being pure arrangements of shape and colour. But there's no breach of the representational contract: this is unmistakably what it says it is. The scene is never reduced to being a mere trigger for clever painterly riffing. The gentle invitation here is to see it differently, and to take that way of seeing with us. In doing that we may realise that Charles has seen very deeply, and with great originality into the underlying principles of how light and colour work in the Australian bush.

This is not achieved accidentally. The work of both Coopers is the product of long, intense, thoughtful, *industrious* looking, involving the resolution of many small and great problems of craft and technique. One of the great satisfactions these works offer is the sense of deliberation and the artisanal ingenuity which has gone into them.

But we might detect another notion lurking in these works too, the artists' own awareness of themselves, in the place, at the scene, observing, 'sticky-beaking', and the constraints which attend that activity. We peep through window frames, doors, over fence tops, through trees and branches. Often in the distance we see a narrowing passage, a darkened doorway, a part opened window, a bridge, an arch, or even a series of arches. This is the opposite to the two dimensional pattern aspect – this is about going deeply into the view, about the trajectory from here to the distant there, and the frames between.





Ashley Cooper *Kangaroo Valley* undated watercolour on paper 22 x 30cm private collection, Sydney

But it's all the one problem, nonetheless: how to arrange those pencil scratches and daubs of paint. The sensation of depth is the artist's sleight of hand, the calculated misdirection, luring us away from consideration of the surface. But part of the fun is that we can't ignore the surface scratches and strokes and splashes for too long. Charles considers this, and invites us to consider it too, consciously, in *Highgate Hill*, *Large window*, *Broadway NYC* and perhaps most pointedly in *Birchgrove window*, where, to see that row of lights in the distance we have to peer through the smoky light reflecting off the glass window (deftly rendered as vague but accurately-seen clouds of lighter tone) and off the surface sheen of the canvas itself. A similar clouding of the outlook is seen in *Colo misty morning*, *Sea mist Dee Why* and *Smoke haze*, *Brookvale*. The simple reminder there that the medium isn't, shouldn't be invisible.

For Ashley Cooper's early twentieth century visits to harbourside industrial sites and old Sydney houses and cabins, those portals in the distance are at once invitations to step up and through, to go further into the scene, and barriers to that. There are real people in there, working, living their lives, whatever. So here, as in all these works the ball ends up in our court: here are ways of looking, of seeing, where we remain equally conscious of the thing looked, in all its wonderful otherness, at and our own act of looking, and how that might open up and be changed.

Peter Doyle  
Macquarie University, Sydney



Ashley Cooper Wyong River 1921 pencil on paper 21.5 x 27.5cm collection Charles Cooper



Ashley Cooper Kerosine Bay 1920 pencil on paper 19.3 x 28.3cm private collection, Sydney





Ashley Cooper *Harbour scene* oil on gesso board 1922 22 x 13cm private collection, Sydney  
Ashley Cooper *Balmain* 1922 oil on gesso board 24x18cm collection Charles Cooper



Ashley Cooper *Barrenjoey* c.1920s pencil on paper 15 x 31cm collection Charles Cooper

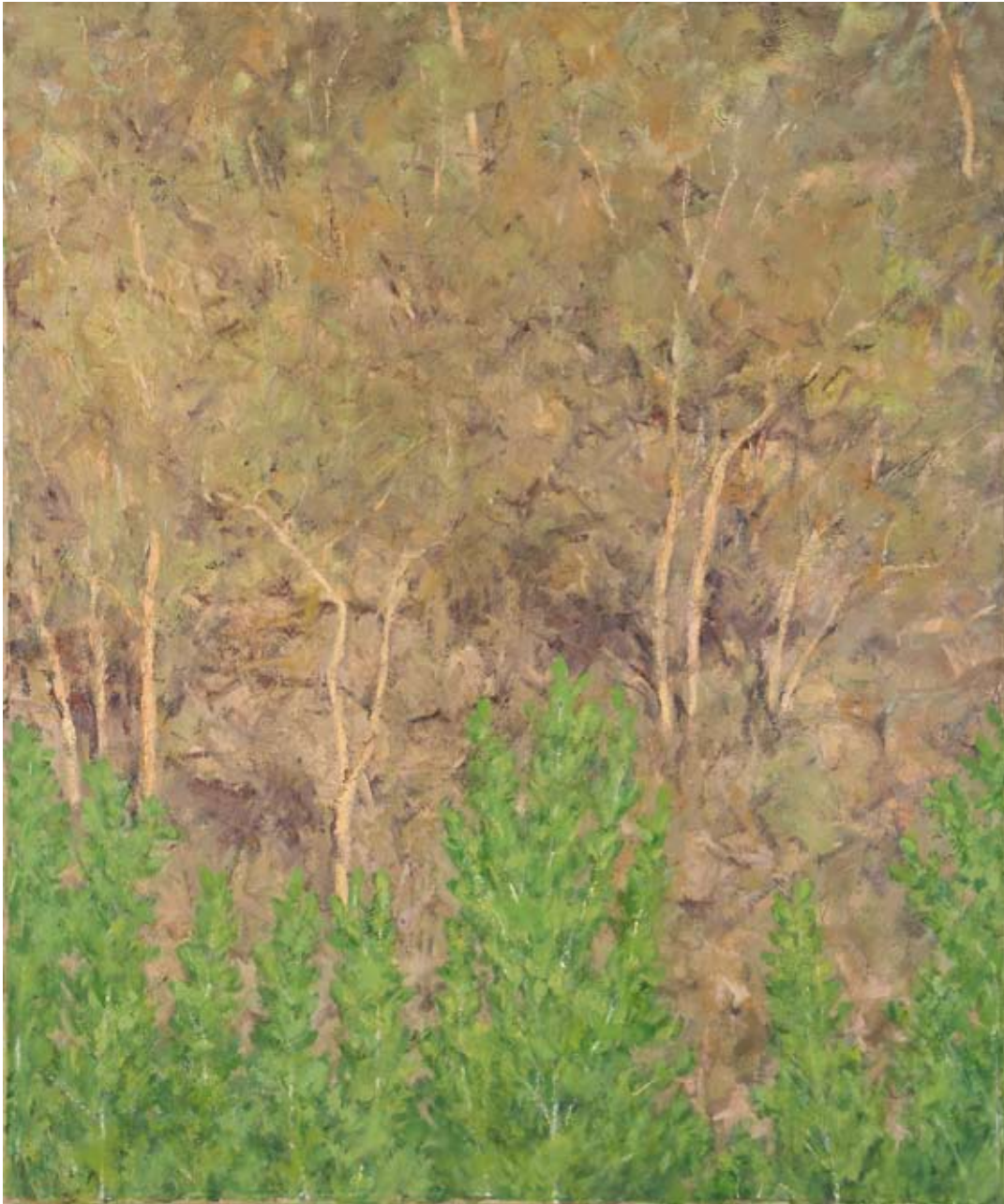


Charles Cooper *Mona Vale* 1989 watercolour & pencil on paper 23 x 39cm courtesy the artist

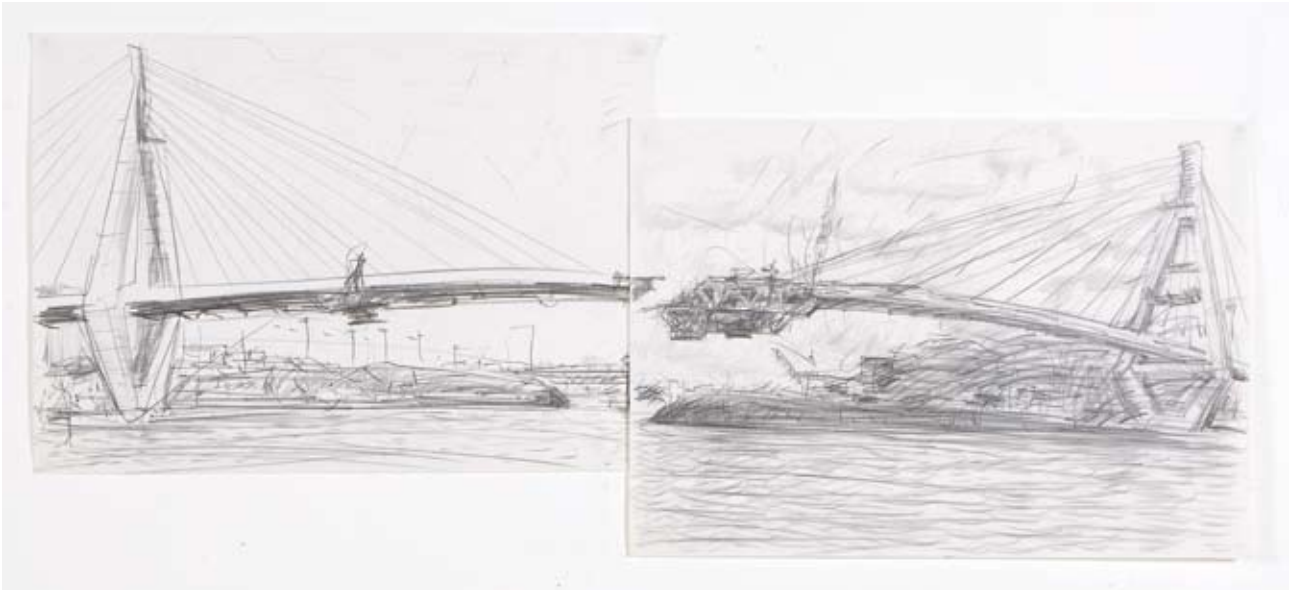


Charles Cooper *Japanese maple, Colo* 1989 watercolour on paper 36 x 26cm courtesy the artist





Charles Cooper *Hillside with poplars, Colo* 1983 oil on linen 122 x 102cm courtesy the artist



Charles Cooper *Building the bridge, Glebe Island* (diptych) 1994 pencil on paper 42 x 59cm each courtesy the artist



Charles Cooper *Traveller, Anzac Bridge* 1994 pencil on paper 26 x 36cm courtesy the artist





Ashley Cooper Ryde c.1910. pencil on paper 19 x 26cm collection Charles Cooper



Charles Cooper *From Kurrajong* 1978 gouache on paper 21 x 28.5cm courtesy the artist



Charles Cooper *An intersection II* 1989 oil on primed paper 39 x 40cm courtesy the artist





Charles Cooper *An intersection III* 1989 oil on primed paper 37 x 39cm courtesy the artist



Ashley Cooper *Tacoma* 1921 pencil on paper 21 x 27.5cm collection Charles Cooper



(left) Ashley Cooper *Cumberland St* c.1922 pencil on paper 27.5 x 21 cm collection Charles Cooper  
(right) Ashley Cooper *A Cumberland St entrance, steps* c.1922 pencil on paper 29.5 x 21 cm collection Charles Cooper





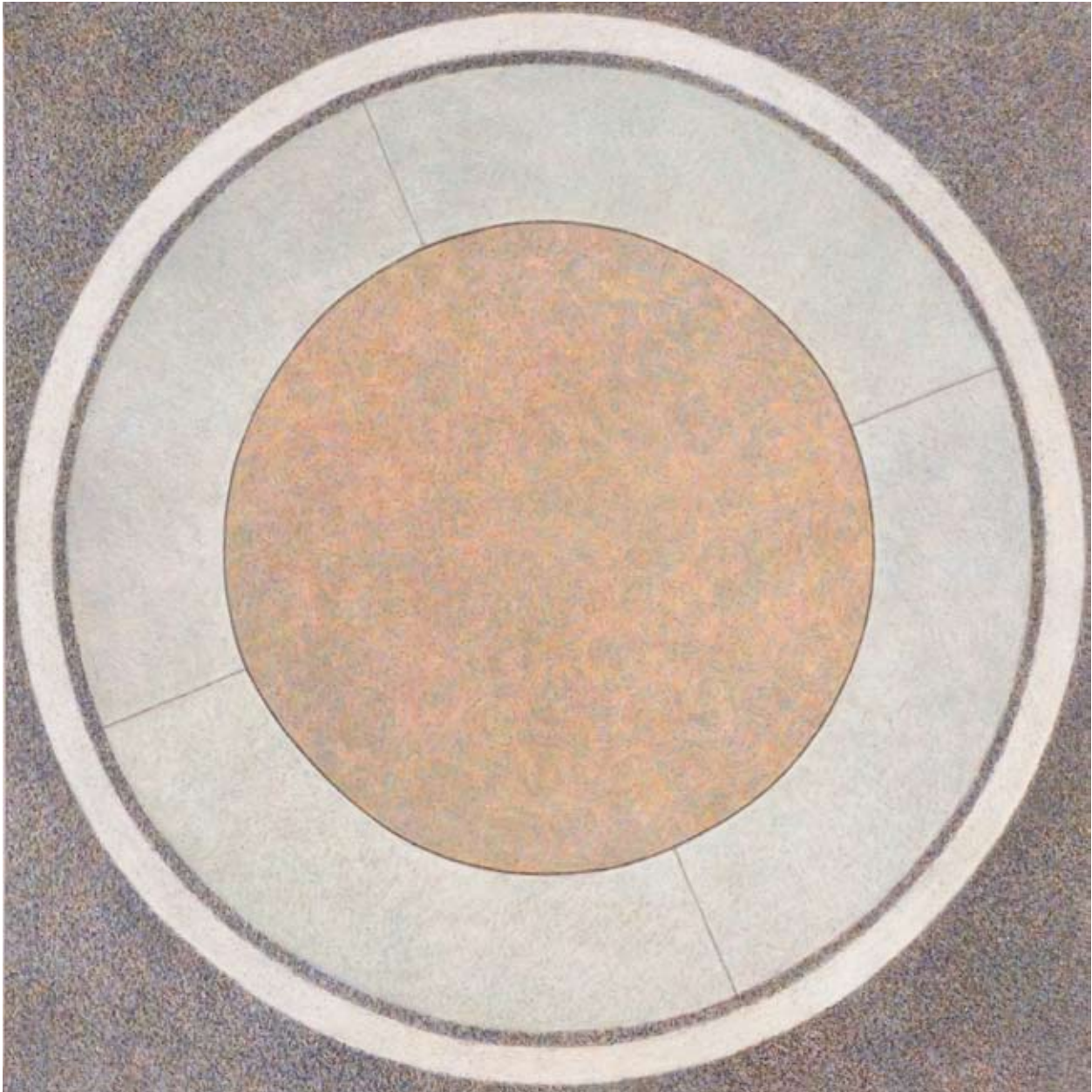
Ashley Cooper *Trees at Ryde* 1910 pencil on paper 21.5 x 27.5cm collection Charles Cooper



Ashley Cooper *Building the bridge – pylon* c.1928 pencil on paper 24.5 x 20.5cm collection Charles Cooper



Ashley Cooper *The Bridge* 1928 pencil on paper 28 x 38cm collection Charles Cooper

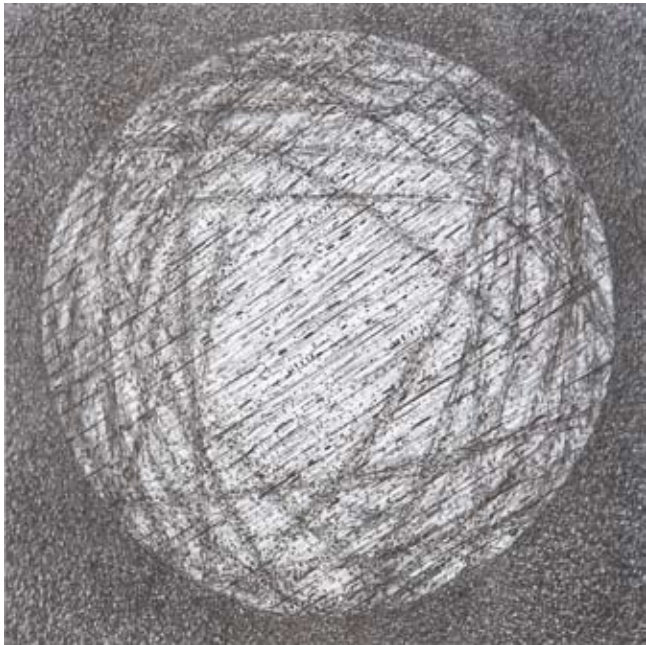


Charles Cooper *Crossroads II* 2005 conte pastel on paper 107 x 107cm courtesy the artist





Charles Cooper *Approaching an intersection* 1993 oil on wood panel 76 x 30cm courtesy the artist  
Charles Cooper *Approaching an intersection II* 1993 oil on wood panel 90 x 28cm courtesy the artist



Charles Cooper *Terra Nullius* 2005 charcoal on paper 60 x 60cm courtesy the artist



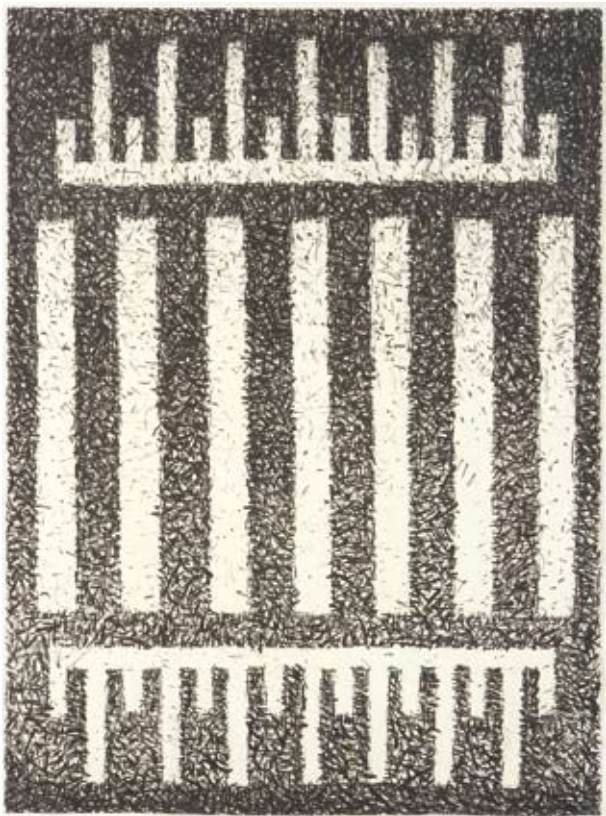
Charles Cooper *Metropolis* 2004 collage on paper 50 x 50cm courtesy the artist





Charles Cooper *Lawson Street II* 1997-2002 oil on canvas 146 x 175cm courtesy the artist





Charles Cooper *Leichhardt High* 2000 ink on paper 103 x 76cm courtesy the artist  
Charles Cooper *Mullens* 2000 charcoal & watercolour on paper 103 x 76cm courtesy the artist



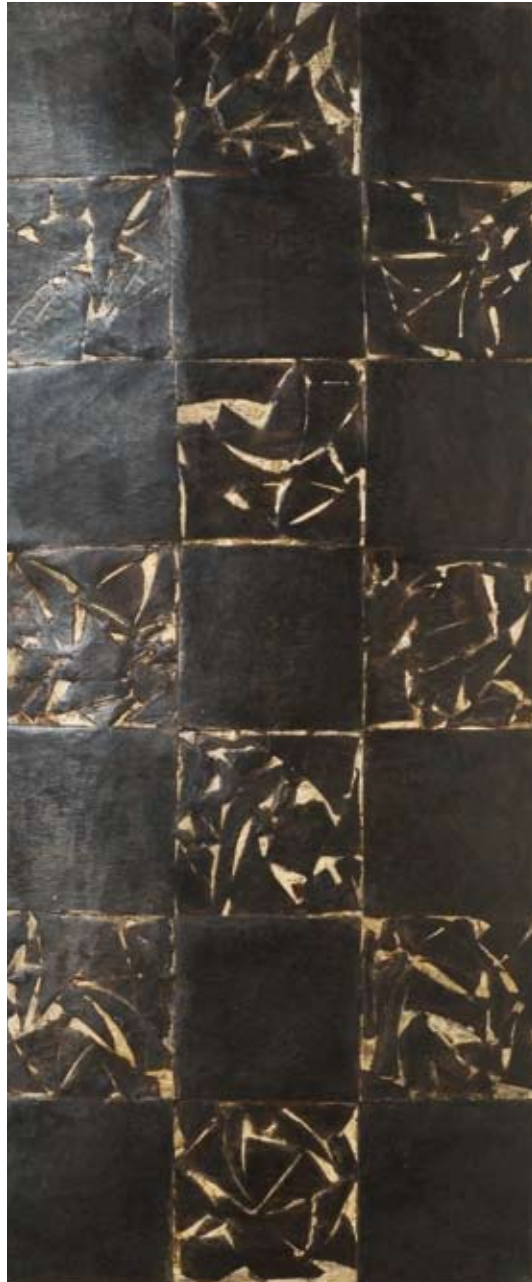
Charles Cooper from the series *Refuge Island – A suburban lot (Dobroyd Point)* (detail) 1998 oil on wood panel 60 x 40cm courtesy the artist

Charles Cooper from the series *New York City (Broadway)* 2000 watercolour on paper 31 x 23cm courtesy the artist



Charles Cooper from the series *Refuge Island – A suburban lot (Redfern)* (detail) 1998 oil on ply wood 60 x 40cm courtesy the artist





Charles Cooper *Relic* 2005 mild steel & polymer resin 76.5 x 32 x 4cm (fabrication Stephen Coburn) courtesy the artist and Annandale Galleries, Sydney



Charles Cooper *William* 2010 oil on canvas on ply 105 x 100cm courtesy the artist and Annandale Galleries, Sydney



Charles Cooper Brierly 2010 oil on linen 326 x 209cm courtesy the artist and Annandale Galleries, Sydney



## Ashley Cooper b.1889, Orange, NSW – d. 1970, Windsor, NSW

Ashley Cooper moved to Sydney in 1901 and on leaving school joined the Australian Gas Light company where he worked for 47 years, interrupted by 4 years in the Australian Imperial Forces (Egypt, France and Belgium). He studied at Granville Technical Art School before WWI, and were continued in 1919 at Hassall's School of Art in London. He met his wife, Caryl Tate in London who had been a student at the Slade School of Art. Ashley maintained a regular exhibition career with paintings, drawings and etchings. He was a member of the Australian Society of Black and White Artists and the Royal Art Society from 1924 – 1938. In 1954 he retired to his land on the Colo River, their inspiration for 30 years. He was founding president of the Macquarie Towns Art Society until his death in 1970.

## Charles Cooper b. 1952. Lives and works Sydney

Since 1974 Charles Cooper has exhibited in Sydney (Macquarie, Bloomfield, Garry Anderson, Tin Sheds, Ivan Dougherty and Annandale Galleries), Melbourne, Canberra, Monaco, Cambridge UK and New York City; and he has work in many regional and university collections, including Artbank. His exhibition 'Metaphysical Graffiti' toured regional galleries in NSW and Victoria from 1988-90. He has been awarded a number of commissions including the Australian Stock Exchange (1988), Ryde Council (Putney Park 1998); awards include the Hunter's Hill Art Prize (1978), an Australia Council CEAD Grant (1996) and the AGNSW Trustee's Watercolour Prize (1998); artist-in-residencies include the Australian National University (1995) and the Cite des Arts, Paris (2006). He initially studied at Julian Ashton (172-73), followed by a MVA at the City Art Institute (1998). He has taught drawing and painting at the University of Sydney's College of the Arts, UNSW College of Fine Arts and since 1998 at the National Art School, Sydney.

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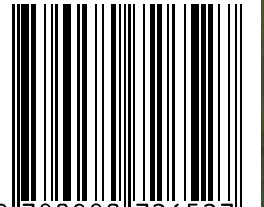
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