

## Still Life with Buddha and Cornflowers, 1989

It was early 1990, the final weeks of summer, and Brett Whiteley was in a reflective, expansive mood. He was 50, newly divorced, struggling with sobriety, and almost certainly the most prominent artist in Australia. He had just returned from Paris, where he had set himself the challenge of creating a new image every day for sixty days, a kind of “high-octane visual poetic journalism.” Those works were about to be unveiled at the Art Gallery of NSW, one of two Whiteley exhibitions opening simultaneously in Sydney. The other, at Australian Galleries in Paddington, was a “heraldic celebration” of recent travels, and included works from Byron Bay, Marrakesh, Japan and Tuscany.

So, yes, Whiteley was busy. His prices were soaring. And yet, as he sat down for an interview with ABC radio presenter Andrew Olle, there was a note of unease in his voice as he spoke about the trajectory of his life and work. “I’d like to sort of head on up to the autumn of my life,” he said, “and get it really structured and more mature. I’d love that.”

For those who knew something of his inner-world, there were hints in this interview, and in his art, to the turbulence in his life. Whiteley had dedicated the AGNSW show to Wendy, his former wife, and to Janice Spencer, his girlfriend, with whom his relationship was “wobbly” but continuing. These were complicated times, as he explained to Olle: “I’m not doing too well with the women at the moment.”

Over in Paddington, one of the paintings on display at Australian Galleries was a still life called *Still Life with Buddha and Cornflowers*. It was a revealing image. In the centre of the space, Whiteley placed a bulbous white vase and filled it with brilliant, blue cornflowers. The vase, covered in nudes, sat beside a green Buddha and two sets of white pearls. An otherwise flat picture plane was given depth by the drawers below, one of which opens to a glimpse of a sketch, perhaps a nude.

In his selection of objects, Whiteley’s preoccupations take shape. The cornflowers and pearls are familiar sign-posts from his visual landscape. Along with the Buddha—another recurring theme, his fascination with all things Zen—these items appear regularly in his art. Those cornflowers and pearls point in particular to the

creative and personal influence of Wendy, the woman he had married in London some 28 years earlier. Wendy, no longer his wife, is absent but forever present. The Whiteleys were now in the process of untangling themselves from each other’s worlds, moving in different directions—but life, of course, is never simple. Circumstances had changed but Whiteley’s comment about Wendy in 1975 carried through: “All of my work has been hinged to her, is drawn formally and aesthetically from her. She is an inexorable part of my creative process.”

The artist once spoke about being “on time for an appointment”, or listening to nature’s instruction. In this 1990 ABC interview, he talks about being open to a higher creative force, whether that means God or something more elusive. “The stiller and the more obedient I am to my centre, then from some inexplicable force (comes) inspiration and recommendation and what to do and what not to do and what to edit, what to put in what to find ... I am the telegram boy rather than the mighty mouse.”

We must be wary, though, of taking biographical analysis too far. For all that we know about Whiteley’s private space, we are left, in the end, to consider the art on its own terms. The pictures either work or they don’t. From his teenage years on, he used his art to respond to the world around him, wherever he happened to be, whatever he happened to be doing at the time. This painting, a quiet meditation on life and art, unfolds with the fluency of line and command of colour that identifies itself at once from his hand.

The art and the life might seem forever entwined, even now, three decades on from his death. But the passing of time helps to strip away the noise, allowing us to see with a level of clarity that might have been obscured before. For all our fascination with the legend, the myth, it’s the art that lives on. Which is why the endurance of his legacy relies more on the quality of the work than the vibrations of the life.

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