

BERNHARD SACHS: AFTER HISTORY

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Bernhard Sachs (1954-2022) was a Melbourne artist and academic, whose expansive practice encompassed drawing, collage, painting, photography, performance and sculpture. Sachs, whose German father migrated to South Australia after World War II, was deeply informed by European art, culture, and philosophy, interweaving it with autobiography to produce a singular oeuvre, which interrogated history to understand its role in shaping the present.

Bernhard Sachs: After History focuses on works drawn from the late artist's studio. Rather than a traditional retrospective, the exhibition seeks to highlight Sachs' unique process of returning to and reworking existing works, sometimes over a period of years. In addition, a parallel display of works by artists whom Sachs educated and mentored will acknowledge his formative influence on several generations of Melbourne visual artists.

A longtime resident of St Kilda, Sachs exhibited at Linden New Art on numerous occasions, as well as serving on the organisation's board. *After History* marks the first major exhibition of Sachs' work since his passing and is a timely opportunity to consider his significant contribution to Australian art and arts education.

This exhibition comprises works from Bernhard Sachs' extant studio in St Kilda, across a range of media. Although the artist worked predominantly in drawing and on paper, he also produced paintings on canvas. Two untitled works from the 1990s share similar imagery and process with Sachs' drawings on display in adjacent galleries. Depicting a female subject and a group scene respectively, both images are partially obscured by layers of drawing and paint, and framed by a prominent grid structure, echoing the stretcher bars on which the paintings are stretched. This 'x-ray' image is a common device in Sachs' work, as a way of making evident the physical structure of an artwork.

On the opposite wall, two similarly untitled prints share similar art historical content and the grid as a framing device. The layers of brown kraft tape around the paper suggest that, like other works in the exhibition, the prints have been altered from their original states.

The two large-scale, multi-panel, charcoal and pastel works on paper in this gallery are from a body of drawings made by Bernhard Sachs in the early 1990s. These works acknowledge the primacy of drawing in his practice, as well as the artist's deep and informed engagement with art history.

Language and utterance - Demonstration: The Vienna School

Reconstruction of the original trauma - St Kilda, 4.45am, 1993 (From X-ray of painting 'Judith and Holofernes' by the Anonymous Master of the Tattooed Madonna) is dominated by the ghostly image of a woman's tattooed head. The image references the Old Testament parable of Judith, a beautiful widow, who lures and decapitates Holofernes, an Assyrian General, as he was about to attack her city, Bethulia. The subject matter was popular for artists in the Renaissance and Baroque periods; the two most notable examples being by Italian master Caravaggio (c.1598-99 or 1602) and Baroque artist Artemisia Gentileschi (c.1620). The work was exhibited in Elements at the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art (ACCA), Melbourne in 1993, about which curator Christopher Chapman wrote:

The works also speak of a bodily experience that resides in the space between death and consciousness. The charcoal dust that allows the images to exist also proposes asphyxiation. The references to memory and sleep cannot escape allusions to death.

The second work in the space, *Erasure: trance= landscape without mercy (from x-ray of painting 'View near S.', painter unknown)* is an x-ray of an erased painting, with only the stretcher bars and frame of the work visible. The surface of the image has been heavily worked by the artist, to the point where the landscape is no longer visible. As evidenced here and elsewhere in this exhibition, the 'x-ray' is a common device in Sachs' works, giving prominence to the physical structure and support of an artwork, as much as its content.

Viewed together, these works embody the tension between exposure

and concealment, life and death, giving rise to a constant state of flux, which characterises much of the artist's oeuvre.

This photographic series is from the larger *During Philosophy* project commenced by Sachs in 1985, which interrogated the subjectivity of history. The work comprises a series of black and white images, manipulated by the artist through photographic dark room processes. The images depict figurative, landscape and urban scenes from both Europe and Australia, which Sachs has labelled with dates and locations. As with the works on paper in the adjacent gallery, the veracity of these inscriptions is questionable, given that some pre-date the artist's birth. This echoes Sachs' words about "history" as depicted in these works being "decidedly unstable".

Sachs adopted a unique process of making, often returning to a work to continue add to and/or erase the image. This is perhaps most evident in this installation of collage and mixed media works on paper, from a number of series made over several decades.

The artist would continually rework his collages, sometimes over a period of years. Each time he would return to a work, Sachs would add another layer of brown kraft tape to attach the work to his studio wall. The growing layers of tape becoming part of the remade work.

Unlike other works in the exhibition, the collages reveal the process of their making through the layers of materials added to each work over the course of time. Sachs would draw or paint over existing images, as well as adding photographs and other personal items, including bandages from blood tests, and handkerchiefs, giving them a diaristic quality.

Many of the works have been coated in shellac, a varnish which affords the works an aged appearance, while others look to have been deliberately torn or degraded by the artist. The time stamps marking their date of remaking often contain an impossible reading, like 1.73am, adding to the sense of these artworks existing outside of chronological time.

More so than other works, Sachs' collages can be understood as being never really finished, instead existing in a constant state of 'becoming' and thus challenging the idea of art as a permanent or fixed thing. Their unique material and processual nature make these collages conservationally less stable than conventional works on paper or canvas, reflecting Sachs' overarching interest in interrogating the idea of an artwork, over producing a standardised output for the commercial market.

This standalone work features a central image of a moon-like form against a black void, created through thick layers of graphite pencil applied to the paper, framed with a border of Sachs' trademark tape, and shellac.

Somnambulism, or sleepwalking, is a condition commonly experienced in childhood and was a popular subject for artists in Victorian England. One of the most famous examples, *The Somnambulist* (1871) by John Everett Millais, depicts a young woman sleepwalking in the dark, perilously close to a cliff's edge. At the time, the condition was the subject of renewed interest by doctors and scientists; Sigmund Freud, for example, connected sleepwalking with subconscious desires.

Although there is no available information about Sachs' work, it is possible that the artist was equating the artistic process with sleepwalking's relationship to dreams and self-expression; it is relevant, for example, that Sachs would timestamp his works with times very late in the evening, or early morning, before sunrise.

The imperfections in the surface of the work, caused in part by it being stored rolled up in Sachs' studio, as well as its extended period of creation, emphasise the physicality of the drawing as an object, and the importance for the artist of process over a finished product.

The atrium space features a selection of catalogues from exhibitions that Bernhard Sachs was involved in.

In addition, a display of ephemera from Sachs' studio, including diaries and exhibition invitations, provides context to the works on display in the exhibition, and acknowledges his position as a central figure in Melbourne and Australia's visual arts communities for more than three decades.

LIST OF WORKS - Courtesy of the Artist's Estate

Untitled (*Left of the fireplace*)

1995

Oil on canvas

Untitled

1993

Oil on canvas

Untitled

n.d.

Etching on paper, kraft tape

Untitled

n.d.

Etching on paper, kraft tape

**Language and Utterance - Demonstration: The Vienna School
Reconstruction of the original trauma - St Kilda, 4.45am, 1993
(From X-ray of painting 'Judith and Holofernes' by the
Anonymous Master of the Tattooed Madonna)**

1991-1993

Charcoal and pastel on paper

Erasure: trance=landscape without mercy

(from x-ray of painting 'View near S. ', painter unknown)

1992

Charcoal and pastel on paper

Somnambulist - Iconoclastic Anti-Klein Group Skin Bloc.

1996-2008

Graphite on paper, tape

Photography (During philosophy)

1990

Photographs on paper

Parsifal, South Melbourne 1994

2012

Digital print on paper

**Philosophia Reformata - (after Fassbinder - Berlin
Alexanderplatz)**

The Impenetrable Hour 5:15am Melbourne 1998

1998

Digital print on paper

**Metempsychosis after Petrus Christus / Das Fatale Paranoiac
Critical Iconoclastic Agnostic Dispersion Melbourne 6.37am**

2016

Oil and tape on paper

Das Fatale / Paranoiac Critical Agnostic Dispersion Melbourne

2.37am 2002 / Reworked 4.57am 2020

Mixed media on paper, tape

Kontaminierte Vererbungsdiagnostik Lidice, Süd Australien 1929

10:54am 1997 / Reworked 2:13am 2004 / Reworked 4:57am

2020 / Reworked 5:08am 2021

Mixed media on paper, tape

Greg Ades, Su Baker, Damiano Bertoli, Drasko Boljevic, Barbara Bolt, Godwin Bradbeer, Sandra Bridie, Christian Capurro, Jon Cattapan (with Ben McKeown), Peter Daverington, Julie Davies, Matthew Davis, Janenne Eaton, Chantal Faust, Elizabeth Gower, Stephen Haley, Irene Hanenbergh, Ry Haskings, Raafat Ishak, Kate Just, Sean Loughrey, Sally Mannall, Nicholas Mangan, Victor Meertens, Tom Nicholson, Alex Rizkalla, Bill Sampson, Rohan Schwartz, Ben Sibley, Krishnamurti Suparka, Masato Takasaka, KBT (Kieran Boland | Brie Trenerry) and Ronnie van Hout

Bernhard Sachs lectured in art at the Victorian College of the Arts (VCA) from 1989 until 2019 and was highly sought-after as a supervisor for artists undertaking their PhD. As colleague and friend Professor Su Baker AM, Pro-Vice Chancellor, Culture, University of Melbourne, observed at the time of Sachs' passing:

“As a supervisor of students and their work he was exemplary, and his influence will be felt for years to come. There are many artists working today that will attest to this direct impact on their work. His mentorship provided a model of living life through art, igniting rigour, drive and an appreciation of the power of art, irrespective of whether we were his students, his colleagues, his fellow artists or his friends.”

This display acknowledges Sachs' formative influence on several generations of visual artists in Melbourne. In addition to former students, the display includes works by artists whom Sachs taught with at the VCA, as well as friends. It is a small and subjective selection, developed in conjunction with the artist's estate. It is by no means exhaustive, an impossible feat given how many artists Bernhard engaged with over his long artistic and professional careers.

Invited artists were asked to nominate a work (within size restrictions) that could have a connection with Sachs, but this was not mandatory. Some artists have contributed portraits of the artist, while others have

created new, or selected existing, examples which hold personal significance.

It is noteworthy that while numerous students were supervised by Sachs, the artists represented in this display went on to forge personal and professional friendships with him, outside of their studies.

Sachs had a reputation as being a firm but fair teacher. He was not interested in acolytes or inspiring a school of copyists. Rather, he was drawn to students who demonstrated intellectual curiosity, artistic rigour and deep commitment to their practice, irrespective of style, a fact reflected in the diversity of works on display in this space.

List of Works – Participating Artists

1. Stephen Haley, *Ediface (Portrait of B)*, 2025, Oil on linen. Courtesy of the artist.
2. Julie Davies, *dismantle #6*, 2006-2009, Inkjet print on archival paper. Courtesy of the artist.
3. Masato Takasaka, *Untitled (After History for BS)*, 2000/2013/2025, Laser jet print on paper. Courtesy of the artist and STUDIO MASATOTECTURES
4. Alex Rizkalla, *A to Z of Health and Wealth*, 2002, Photocopy on Perspex. Courtesy of the artist's estate.
5. Janenne Eaton, *The ghost of Jan van Eyck's angel – the angel of history*, 2018, Lustre print on HIPS. Courtesy of the artist.
6. Ronnie van Hout, *No More + No Less*, 2025. Holographic print, artist's frame. Courtesy of the artist, STATION, Melbourne, and Darren Knight Gallery, Sydney. *Note: Use phone light to reveal image.*
7. Jon Cattapan and Ben McKeown, *Four Moods (For B.S.)*, 2025, Pencil on paper and acrylic on canvas board. Collection of Jon Cattapan, courtesy of the artists.
8. Raafat Ishak, *Courbet's Funeral at Ornans 1850*, 2024, Oil on paper. Courtesy of the artist and Sutton Gallery, Melbourne.
9. Su Baker, *Light and Dark*, 2009, Oil on canvas. Courtesy of the artist.
10. Barbara Bolt, *The Apostate*, 2021 (reworked 2023, printed 2025), Digital Painting on Hahnemühle German Etching Rag. Courtesy of the artist.
11. Rohan Schwartz, *tense; present*, 2024 Dust, sand, glass, decals,

epoxy resin, 12oz punctured canvas, paper pulp, glues, sealant, acrylic-based enamel paint, temperature-treated oil-based enamel paint, bored timber, hardwood. Courtesy of the artist.

12. Damiano Bertoli, *Untitled*, 2005, Oil on board. Collection of Raafat Ishak and Pip Morrison.

13. Bill Sampson, *“What’s going on here then?”*, 2025, Endemic charcoal and ash, graphite, and ink on canvas. Courtesy of the artist.

14. Tom Nicholson, *Untitled (Timeball Tower)*, 2025, Willow charcoal and compressed charcoal on paper. Courtesy of the artist and Milani Gallery, Brisbane.

15. Sean Loughrey, *Voicing the Archive (Jimmy’s Calling)*, 2024-25, Paint, paper, card and tape. Courtesy of the artist.

16. Greg Ades, *Lake*, 2019, Oil on linen. Courtesy of the artist.

17. Ben Sibley, *Precious Archive*, 2021. Compressed charcoal on paper. Courtesy of the artist and Jacob Hoerner Gallery, Melbourne.

18. Nicholas Mangan, *Blueprint for a solar revolution*, 2015, Cyanotype. Courtesy of the artist, Sutton Gallery, Melbourne, and LABOR, Mexico City.

19. Matthew Davis, *Draft Morning*, 2024-25, Digital sound. Courtesy of the artist.