

JOHN GREGORY

Mining the Howard Arkley Archive

Howard Arkley (1951–99), one of the significant Melbourne artists who came to prominence in the 1970s, has become particularly well known, especially posthumously, for his vivid suburban house imagery. In fact, he explored a much wider variety of themes and styles during a 25-year career that developed from late modernist abstraction to stylised furniture installations, psychedelic- and drug-inspired imagery, urban subjects and portraits. These various subjects (and others) were obviously based on Arkley's everyday and imaginative life but also drew on his extensive studio collection of references, source material, notes and drawings, the bulk of them now available publicly in State Library Victoria as the Howard Arkley Archive.¹

Some of this material has been published and analysed previously. Arkley himself foregrounded his use of source material and working drawings several times, most explicitly in his *Casual works* exhibition, shown in Melbourne and Brisbane in 1988. After his death, privileged access to his library and other studio material was crucial to my own accounts of his art and working methods, and further research was carried out for the 2015–16 exhibition *Howard Arkley and friends*, curated by Anthony Fitzpatrick and Victoria Lynn. Despite these studies, though, much of the material in the archive remains unexamined.²

Untitled house, coloured photocopy, 29.5 × 21.0 cm, c. 1995, Howard Arkley Archive, MS 14217 (hereafter HAA), 1/1062. Unless otherwise noted, all reproductions in this article are by Howard Arkley, © The Estate of Howard Arkley, courtesy Kalli Rolfe Contemporary Art.



Creative artists' workplaces and resources take diverse forms, ranging from chaotic to meticulously manicured. Arkley's studio collection and working methods were often characterised in the past as typically anarchic – as suggested, for example, by the title and catalogue essays for his *Casual works* exhibition. But his surviving studio material is relatively coherent and comprehensive, ranging from collections of comics to photographs, books and magazines, notebooks and visual diaries, doodles, sketches and finished drawings. They provide numerous opportunities for tracing the evolution of many of the artist's completed works, as well as his planning for others that never eventuated (his 'virtual oeuvre'), including tantalising hints at compositions unrealised at his death.³ In the following remarks I suggest further possible pathways through this rich field. Crucially, the Howard Arkley Archive is much more than simply an assortment of 'source material' and sketches for completed or planned works. Indeed, his studio collection exemplifies a point made recently by art historians Amelia Barkin and Chris McAuliffe, quoting United States sculptor Robert Smithson, that artists' archives and their formal oeuvre often form a 'dual unity'.⁴ Likewise, Arkley's archive tells a parallel story that is often equally as illuminating as his major exhibited work and significantly different from it in some respects. This article discusses select examples from this extensive collection, from Arkley's earliest student output to his increasingly assured late works.

Foundations

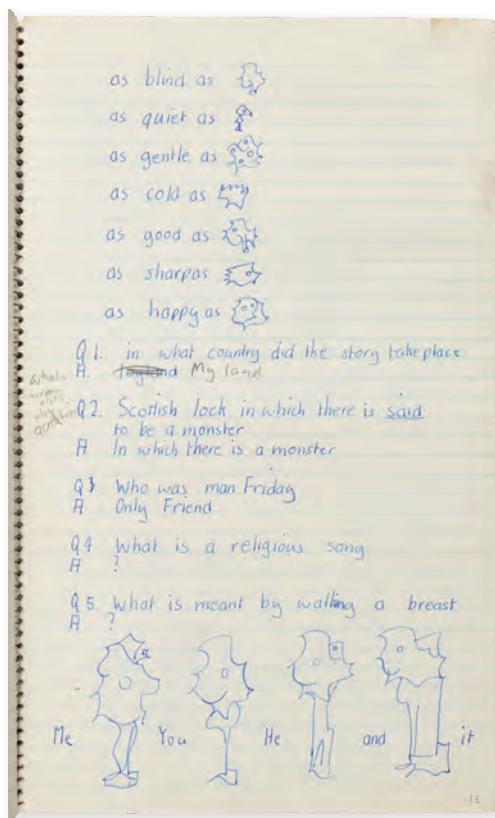
Like the 'juvenilia' of many others, Arkley's student works reveal a young artist yet to find his own style but clearly talented and open to a wide range of cultural influences. With hindsight, too, one can detect the origins of many of his characteristic concerns and methods. Previous accounts of his formative years have identified various stimuli and influences, including 'outsider art' and art brut, and works by German modernist artist Ernst Kirchner and Australian painter Sidney Nolan. These discussions, particularly those published before Arkley's death (based largely on his memories and scattered biographical records), obviously provide important insights into his early development.⁵

But much more extensive evidence is provided by the large collection of artworks dating from his later secondary (1966–68) and tertiary (from 1969) studies, most of them held in the archive.⁶ His student years coincided with a particularly important period of cultural and political change, around 1968, often regarded as a watershed between modernism and the following 'postmodern' era.⁷ Further research is required to make proper sense of Arkley's student works, mostly undated; but the broad lines of his early



Untitled 'rock poster', ink, paint and collage, 34.0 × 26.2 cm, c. 1968, HAA, 1/220

development and interests are clear. A characteristic example is the collaged 'rock poster' shown above, annotated by Arkley as dating from his third year at Box Hill Tech (1966) but obviously later, since it adapts Melbourne designer Ian McCausland's promotional poster for the Australian tour by The Who, The Small Faces and Paul Jones in January 1968. It is unclear whether Arkley attended one of their Melbourne concerts at Festival Hall (25 and 26 January), but he clearly knew the poster, which was also reproduced, differently coloured, on the cover of Melbourne music newspaper *Go-Set* in January 1968.⁸ Both McCausland's design and Arkley's variant typify the psychedelic imagery and stylised lettering familiar from posters and record covers of the era, a classic period for album covers, including The Beatles' *Revolver* (Klaus Voorman, 1966) and famous examples from 1967 by pop artists Andy Warhol, Peter Blake and Martin Sharp, all surely familiar to the teenage Arkley. Two later drawings of a large open mouth⁹ reference the cover of King Crimson's debut album, *In the court of the crimson king* (Barry Godber, 1969), foreshadowing Arkley's mature



Sketchbook 1, p. 13, pen and pencil, 33.0 × 20.3 cm, c. 1970, HAA

paintings *Psychedelic head* (1990) and *Second psychedelic head* (1992). These works document the beginnings of Arkley's life-long fascination with popular music and its imagery, which is also reflected in his 1970s drawings and visual diaries, as noted by Chris McAuliffe.¹⁰

Some early drawings typify the complex line work and heady content of late 1960s psychedelic art while also reflecting the influence of surrealism, previously identified as one of Arkley's major early interests.¹¹ In the late 1960s, Arkley also developed a personal iconography of tubular animals, or 'friends'; a mysterious key to their meaning appears on a page of his 1970 sketchbook, reproduced above. Apparently inspired by the 'automatic' methods of the surrealists, these creatures inhabit many drawings and collages in the archive dating from the late 1960s to the early 1970s; some show hordes of them in boxes, while others suggest their hybrid, humanoid quality. One example simply adds a single creature to the smoke issuing from a cannon in an old military photograph.¹² Boxes full of them play a prominent role in many of Arkley's more complex and resolved works on paper from 1971–72 and in some of his early canvases, including one identified recently as *In which box do you belong*, submitted to the Corio Whisky Prize at the Geelong Gallery in 1971. The critters reappear intermittently in Arkley's visual diaries and



Untitled head, synthetic polymer paint and ink, 46.0 × 37.5 cm, c. 1969, HAA, 1/428

sketches throughout the 1970s and still lurk in corners of his major work-on-paper mural *Primitive* of 1981.

Arkley's tertiary art studies at Prahran College of Advanced Education exposed him to other modern art styles besides surrealism. Archive examples include drawings apparently influenced by European modern artists Paul Klee (one of which appears above), Jean Arp¹³ and other modern and contemporary artists mentioned in his early notebooks. Another key development from this period, Arkley's discovery of the air-brush as a painting tool (documented as introduced to him by Melbourne painter and Prahran teacher Fred Cress), is reflected in several archive drawings, including test sheets.¹⁴

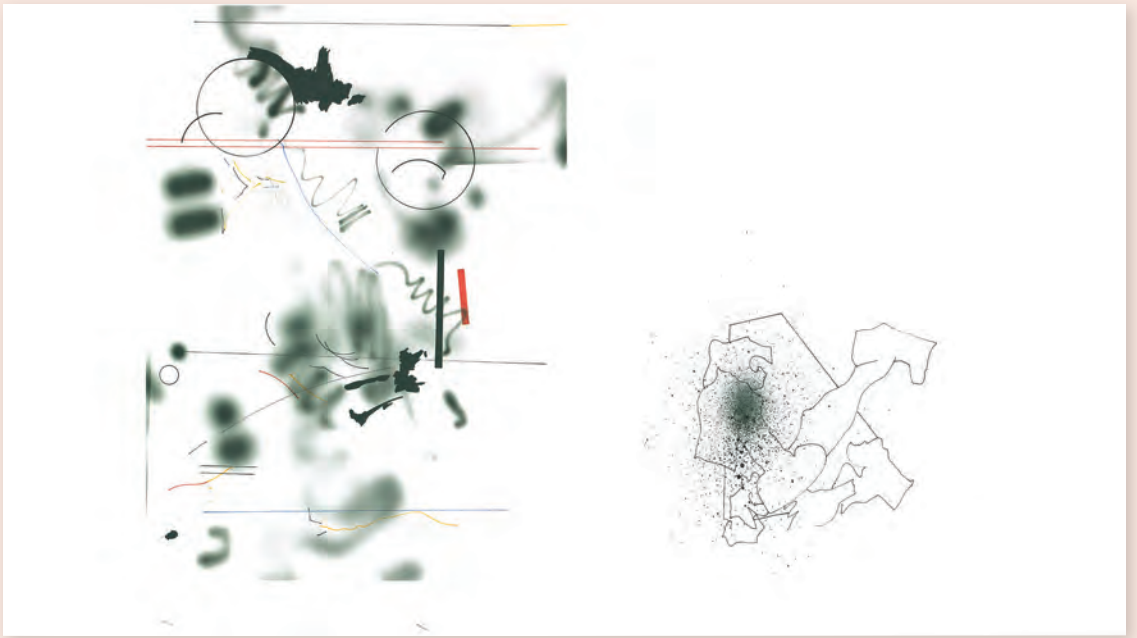


Statue of blind man with dog!, pen and ink, 30.4 × 48.3 cm (sheet), c. 1974, HAA, 1/84

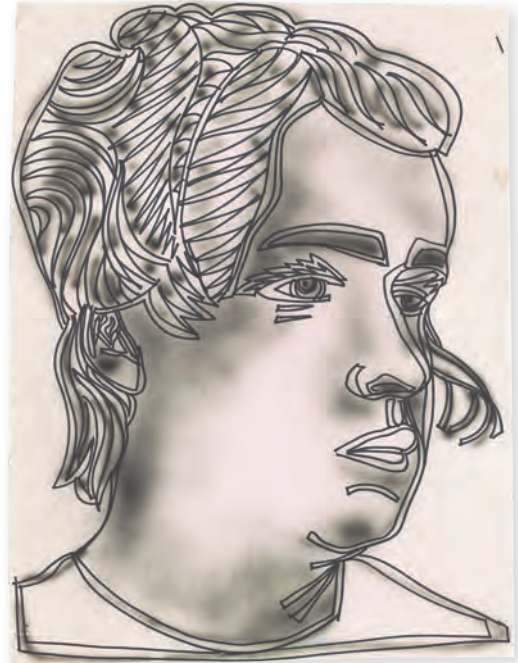
Other significant components of Arkley's student oeuvre include architectural renderings produced during his Prahran studies in 1969, various lively pen and ink sketches, such as *Statue of blind man with dog!* (shown above), and several works on paper entered in prizes or exhibited during the early 1970s.

An important recent addition to the archive is a group of Arkley's first fully resolved works on paper – his 'white' drawings, produced in parallel with his first solo exhibitions of abstract paintings, featuring sprayed and drawn details, mostly black, on stark white canvases (1975–77). These paintings earned him strong critical recognition and have been noted since as based on a complex range of references, including minimal art, the aesthetic theory of philosopher George Kubler and the mystical beliefs of the theosophical movement.¹⁵ The works on paper, also mostly monochrome, became his single most sustained and concentrated series, amounting to nearly 300 drawings. Some relate directly to individual white canvases, but the complete corpus has a broader character, apparently serving partly as a course of self-instruction, along the lines of Klee's *Pedagogical sketchbook* (1925), often mentioned and quoted in Arkley's early notebooks.¹⁶

The great majority of these drawings remained in Arkley's studio at his death. About a third have since been dispersed by the Arkley Estate to public collections, including the State Library, which holds well over 20 examples.¹⁷ These include sheets related to major canvases of the period, such as one that is closely comparable with *Stroke* (1975), later acquired for the National Australia Bank collection¹⁸; two drawings included in the *Casual works* exhibition as examples of his working method¹⁹; and a fine example of the most highly finished white drawings, a sheet contrasting geometric forms with an organic shape, shown at the top of the page opposite.



Top Untitled 'white' drawing, synthetic polymer paint, ink and pencil, 45.6 × 76.1 cm, c. 1974–76, HAA, 1/1712 **Bottom** Untitled sheet of doodles, fibre-tipped pen, 45.5 × 59.6 cm, c. 1980, donation to HAA in progress



Left Artist unknown, source image for *Feet* in visual diary no. 37, p. 63, printed image on beige paper, 5.30 × 4.25 cm, compiled 1993, HAA **Right** Untitled head, synthetic polymer paint and fibre-tipped pen, 56 × 76 cm, c. 1985, donated pending approval through the Australian Government's Cultural Gifts Program

Work in progress

In 1981–82, young Melbourne critic and writer Paul Taylor included Arkley's works in influential discussions of recent Australian art as 'second wave' and 'second degree', emphasising 'Popist' appropriations from other imagery. These views gave Arkley significant critical prominence while, as has been observed, misrepresenting his approach to some extent.²⁰ In fact, Arkley's 1980s oeuvre contains many works, beginning with *Primitive*, that were based essentially on his own imaginative drawings. Many finished works on paper and canvas originated in freely drawn doodles, as in the case of the oblong form to the left of a typical page of sketches from about 1980 reproduced at the bottom of page 13, later repeated in more resolved form, with variations, in several large-scale sprayed works on paper (c. 1982–88).²¹

Obviously, though, Arkley did often recycle images from both 'high art' and popular culture in the period; but he did so with specific aims and methods. In patterned works dating from 1978 to 1981, including *Tram no. 384* (1980), he tapped sources ranging from suburban flywire doors and disco lighting to Islamic ornament and Bauhaus design. The archive contains numerous references, images and fabric samples relating to these works, and Arkley spelt out the principles behind these quotations in his visual diaries,



Modified copy of freeway photograph, c. 1989, HAA, 1/1182

art-historical sources. Visual diary no. 37, a later assemblage of source images, includes a clipping of a crucifixion woodcut used for *Tattooed feet* (shown on page 14) densely decorated in the completed canvas by patterns derived from tattooing references. Some of these were later included in the *Casual works* exhibition and are now held in the National Gallery of Victoria, together with the main work on paper from the same ensemble, another tattooed head. The 1988 *Tattooed* ensemble also included original works on paper developed by Arkley for other projects, such as the large head reproduced on page 14, which was closely connected with his *Artist and five friends* project (1984–85).²⁴

During the 1980s, then, Arkley's characteristic approach, as in *Suicide* (1983) and various other major compositions, involved generating new meanings and visual ideas from a *mélange* of sources, based on both other imagery and his own sketches and doodles. For all the bravura and intensity of his style in this period (arguably his most fertile and inventive), close analysis reveals that his working methods were often considered, complex and, sometimes, surprisingly traditional. For instance, his only outright landscape painting, *Waterfall 2*, painted for the National Australia Bank collection in 1988, was



Freeway exit, synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 203 × 153 cm, 1996, private collection.
 Courtesy Scott Livesey Galleries, Armadale

achieved through an elaborate process involving modified source images and working drawings, several of which are preserved in the archive.²⁵

Suburban redevelopment

Arkley's major subject after 1985, the suburban house, accounts for a large quantity of the archive material, much of it noted and discussed in the past. His key suburban sources were actually quite straightforward, the exteriors based invariably on real-estate line drawings and the interiors on various home-decorator sources. The real interest of these compositions, though, lies not in their everyday origins but in the formal subtleties and variations Arkley brought to their pictorial use, as several studies have shown in detail.²⁶

In the 1990s, he tended to reprise his own earlier suburban images, often softening the palette, using grey rather than black line work, and including rich ornamentation, usually elaborately stencilled. Typically, he planned the compositions and more nuanced colour schemes for these later works using coloured photocopies, ranging from cursory sketches to more resolved sheets. The example reproduced on page 7 relates closely to the 1995 canvas *Floriated address* and variants from 1995–96. The more complex planning involved in the expanded suburban interiors used for Arkley's collaboration with Chilean-Australian painter Juan Davila, *Blue chip instant decorator: a room* (1991–92) and *Fabricated rooms* (1997–99), was developed through extensive working drawings, combining photocopies, collage and colour notes.²⁷

Roadworks

An exemplary demonstration of Arkley's late stylistic development and working procedure is provided by the imagery he first explored in two large-scale canvases shown at Tolarno in November 1994: *A freeway painting (overpass)* and *A freeway painting (exit)*. Widely reproduced and exhibited since, both paintings set a new benchmark for Arkley in their scale and monumentality. Over the next five years, he revisited the freeway theme several times, on both canvas and paper, revealing his mature tendency to circle back repeatedly to certain compositions, varying and refining formal detail and colour, and in most cases using grey line work. Later commentators suggested, simplistically, that the grey lines evoke a dull or melancholy mood. In fact, most of these works are relatively warm and buoyant in colour, and the larger paintings in particular exhibit long, sweeping lines and a powerful formal structure.²⁸

Freeways, of course, are a familiar feature of contemporary cities, frequently appearing in modern literature, film and visual art, often as metaphors for everything from freedom and exhilaration to alienation and despair. The subject arose naturally from the urban themes Arkley had been investigating for some years, foregrounded in the 1995 *Downtown* exhibition at the Heide Museum of Modern Art, where curator Juliana Engberg juxtaposed suburban and urban paintings by Arkley (including a freeway) with works by two of his heroes, local artist Robert Rooney and United States West Coast photographer and painter Ed Ruscha. Arkley surely knew many other examples of freeway imagery, including the meticulous images of Australian painter Jeffrey Smart, especially *Cahill expressway* (1962). Arkley's visual diary no. 37 also includes a clipping of an urban road complex by his near-contemporary Australian painter Stewart MacFarlane, a detail of a painting entitled *The re-enactment* (1992).²⁹

Arkley's original 1994 overpass painting was based on a photograph he took during a trip to Canberra in 1989.³⁰ The canvas echoed its composition but softened the curve of the flyover in a modified photocopy, reproduced on page 16. Later variants reprised the central section in a vertical format, such as *Freeway exit* (shown on page 17), which is exactly half the width of the first 1994 painting. In two further working drawings, Arkley added a purple sky to copies of the same image, possibly in preparation for a later variant, *The Rialto freeway* (1998), which also boasts a vivid purple sky, but in a taller format, suiting the space for which it was commissioned.³¹

Two further sketches document the process leading to the composition of Arkley's last major canvas on this theme, *The freeway* (1999), which returned to the monumental scale of the 1994 paintings but in a more attenuated 'widescreen' format, stretching the ratio of height to width to almost 1 to 2.5 (the canvas measures 1.60 × 3.66 metres).³² The extended right-hand section is balanced by a vivid new element, a yellow road sign, for which a full-scale paper stencil is also held in the archive.³³

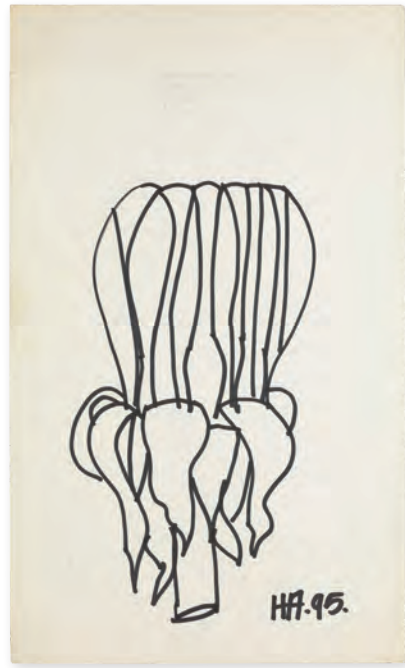
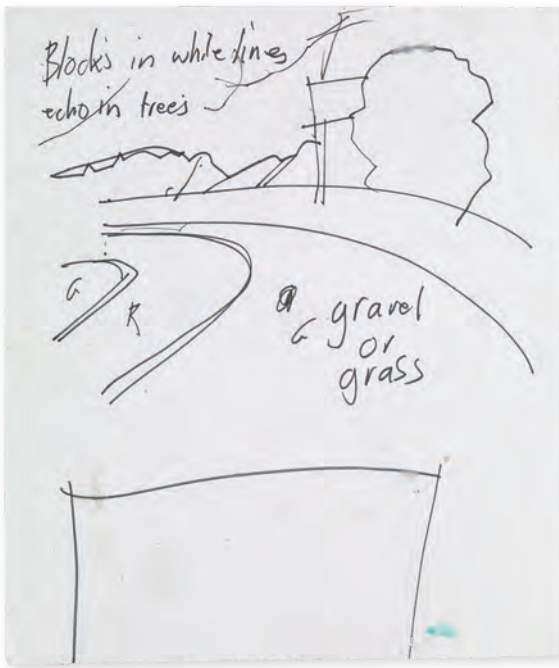
Besides other relevant source material, the archive contains the complete set of 75 freeway photographs Arkley took in Los Angeles in July 1999.³⁴ Some of these focus on flyovers, the emphasis of most of Arkley's earlier 1990s freeways, but others suggest new and distinctly different compositions forming in his imagination shortly before his death, examples of which are shown on page 20. An undated sketch, presumably late (reproduced to the left on page 21), is very interesting in this connection, suggesting a new pictorial formula, placing the focus on the road itself (without an overpass or columns), behind what looks like a foreground sign, with added notes: 'Block in white lines / echo in trees' and 'gravel or grass'. The idea of including lane markings on the road surface may relate to precedents like the 1960s highway paintings of United States pop artist Allan D'Arcangelo, shown in *Two decades of American painting* at the National Gallery of Victoria in 1967.³⁵ Other archive material suggests further planned freeway variants, including a road flanked by a 'billboard distorted by block pixels', a columned view beneath an overpass and a wide horizontal flyover based on a collage of two other Canberra photographs by Arkley.³⁶

Taking possession

Other sketches from Arkley's final years resulted in major completed works, notably *Nick Cave* (1999), a commissioned canvas developed through an extensive series of working drawings and preparatory studies, including examples in the archive.³⁷ The painting – Arkley's only unambiguous portrait,



Los Angeles freeway photographs, July 1999, HAA, 8/510 (top), 8/508 (bottom)



Left Untitled freeway sketch, pen, 24.8 × 21.0 cm, c. 1999?, HAA, 1/1202 **Right** Untitled drawing, black fibre-tipped pen, 33.5 × 20.5 cm (sheet), 1995, HAA, 1/1394

although it seems to show less concern with creating a likeness than with generating a visual metaphor for Cave's persona and creativity – clearly reflects the artist's ambition to extend his scope beyond suburban imagery as the 1990s progressed.³⁸ Specifically, it extends the interest in heads and faces documented in Arkley's studio collection from his student years onwards, though this only occasionally eventuated in major completed works, especially in the early 1990s. Also relevant here is a large group of computer-generated drawings of heads from 1998.³⁹



This is just one of the many pathways through the Howard Arkley Archive which have yet to be explored thoroughly, most of them offering the promise of further insights and discoveries. Others include Arkley's collaborative projects with Juan Davila and other contemporaries; his various furniture installations and further projects exploring the interface between art and the everyday; and an extensive group of unpublished studio drawings. This last group includes several large-scale multi-sheet figure drawings and full-scale 'cartoons' for major works and a number of elegant late drawings of flowers, one of which is shown above.