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### Windows, reflections and shadow play in the art of Eric Thake

Eric Thake's impeccable drawing skills, his close observation of his immediate environment, his eye for the unusual and his whimsical sense of humour were, and are, highly regarded and much appreciated by those familiar with his art. He played a quiet but significant role in Melbourne's art scene from the late 1920s to the 1970s, in particular with his early experimentation with surrealism, his work as a Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) war artist during World War II, and his ongoing series of Christmas cards, eagerly anticipated by those fortunate enough to be on the Thakes' Christmas card list. Yet, apart from his war service, Thake produced art only in his spare time, and although he sketched extensively he created few paintings or prints each year. While he participated in various group shows from 1929 onwards, he held only two solo exhibitions, in 1947 and 1966, prior to his retirement in 1970, the year that the National Gallery of Victoria held the first survey exhibition of his art.<sup>1</sup> After this time a number of exhibitions, both commercial and institutional, brought his art – gouache and oil paintings, prints, bookplates, photographs and numerous fluid pencil drawings – to broader attention. His linocut *An opera house in every home* (1972, various collections), of dishes drying in a rack, made during the controversial building of the Sydney Opera House, was his best known and most widely reproduced work of art. Since Thake's death in 1982, however, knowledge of his art has waned, to the detriment

Opposite: Eric Thake, *Sunshine and rain, Lygon St*, linocut on paper, 1964, Pictures Collection, State Library Victoria, H91.278/3



"Sunshine and Rain, Lygon St."

Gric Thake 1964

of our artistic history and to all who are unaware of its great charm and his wonderful skill.

Examining the breadth of Thake's art makes certain motifs and interests of his apparent. This article explores the ways in which Thake employed the window in his art – looking at shop fronts, into shop displays, through windows and doorways – and how he played with reflections in windows and other reflective surfaces. A further consideration is his interest in silhouettes and use of daylight through windows or cast from other sources to create shadows of people who are thus both included in, but also absent from, the scene.

Eric Thake was born in Auburn, Melbourne, in 1904. At the age of 14 he was apprenticed to the art department of Patterson Shugg, a firm of process engravers, where he learned precise draughtsmanship and lettering and was first exposed to Australian art through illustrations printed by the firm. In 1922, aged 18, he began attending evening classes at the National Gallery School, but, as with a number of his contemporaries, he soon sought a more progressive approach, and from 1925 to 1928 he attended Saturday afternoon classes held by artist and teacher George Bell. This led to informal life-drawing classes with artist friends, known as The Thursday Club, which both young students and older and influential artists, such as Bell and Blamire Young, also attended.

Thake's earliest works – small oil landscapes painted *en plein air* and romantic metal-cut prints – show the influence of artists such as Arthur Streeton and Lionel Lindsay. But with Bell 'preaching the gospel of design and simplification',<sup>2</sup> as Thake put it, he soon developed a more considered and composed approach. Art historian Bernard Smith later wrote, 'Thake was one of George Bell's most talented pupils and possessed a splendid sense of design, firm and lucid, sensitive in tone and colour'.<sup>3</sup> His subject matter also moved from the rural to the urban and from there – for a period – into the imaginary. As a child Thake had been fascinated by Cole's Funny Picture Books and Cole's Book Arcade, the latter's multistorey building between Collins and Bourke streets full of books and reading nooks, exotic and mechanical displays, mirrors and even monkeys. The Leonardo Art Shop in Little Collins Street became a similar source of inspiration: started by Italian Gino Nibbi in 1928, it stocked numerous art books, journals, reproductions and postcards of the most innovative, as well as historical, European art. Furthermore, Nibbi had not only seen this art in Italy, Paris and Berlin, but he was personally acquainted with artists such as Giorgio de Chirico, whose influence was soon apparent in Thake's art, as was that of British modernists including Edward Wadsworth



Ron Meers, *Eric Thake looking in a dress shop window*, gelatin silver photograph, 1964, Eric Thake scrapbook, Manuscripts Collection, State Library Victoria, MS 9826 box 3552/4

and Paul Nash. During the 1930s there was also increasing opportunity to see contemporary European art in Melbourne in loan exhibitions, which were widely attended and discussed, and inevitably influential on young artists such as Thake.<sup>4</sup>

Thake began exhibiting both with established art groups such as Sydney's Society of Artists (from 1929), and with small groups, including the short-lived New Group and The Embryos. He was a founding member of the Contemporary Art Group (from 1932) and the Contemporary Art Society (from 1938). By the early 1930s, Thake was already gaining a reputation as one of the young artists challenging the conservative standards. In 1932 he was described as 'notable among modernism's adherents'.<sup>5</sup> His paintings, prints, drawings and bookplates were both praised and questioned in newspapers and magazine reviews, and his art was reproduced in newspapers and the leading journal *Art in Australia*, as well as in *The Studio*, a London magazine of international distribution.<sup>6</sup> Thake, as he himself recalled, 'foolishly destroyed' a number of his early paintings in around 1961 when he and his wife, Grace,

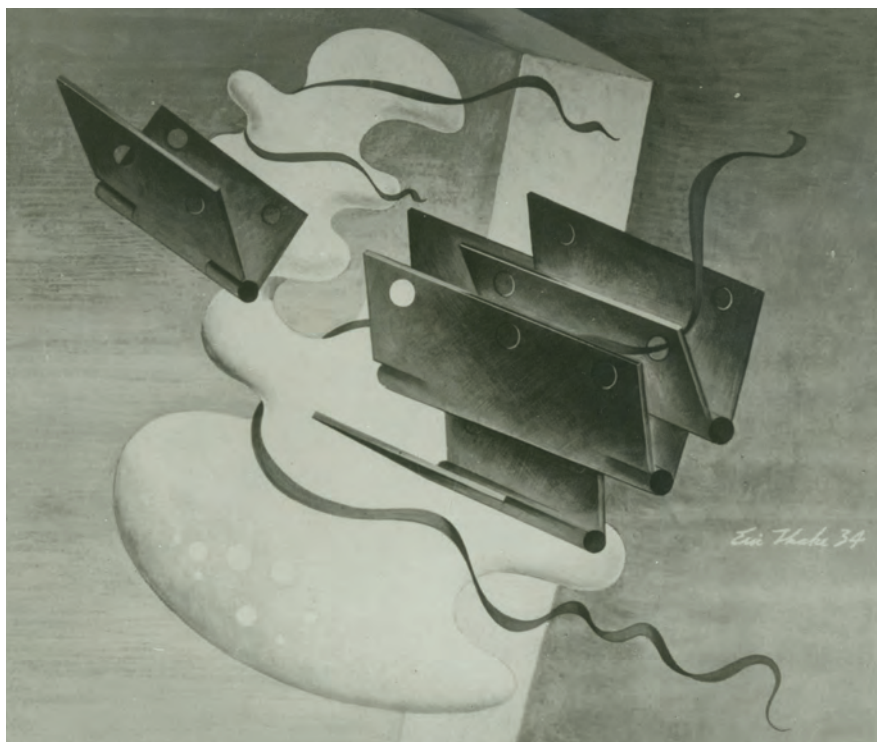


Eric Thake, *Inside looking out*, gouache, 1934, destroyed, photograph in Thake family collection

moved to a smaller apartment, but fortunately black-and-white photographs of seven of these survive, together with descriptive colour notes that he subsequently wrote.<sup>7</sup> Among these are two paintings, both created in 1934, the earliest (known) works to demonstrate what later became a recurring feature in Thake's art.

The use of the window as an architectural and emotional element in paintings has been a common trope in European art since the early Renaissance. Windows often reveal, for example, a contextual landscape behind a portrait sitter or, conversely, may frame a sitter within a room, seen from without. Windows serve their architectural function in illuminating an interior, allowing light to fall across surfaces; this often symbolised divine presence or emphasised domestic security. The symbolism of windows as boundaries between the constructed and the natural world was explored by Romantic artists and further developed by surrealist artists in the early 20th century in their investigation of the conscious and unconscious mind, the permitted and the desired (or feared). Indeed, painting has often been seen as a window into another world, a continuum from the viewer into the illusion created by the artist.

Numerous art-historical studies analysing the use of windows in Western art begin by quoting the early Italian Renaissance artist, architect and theorist



Eric Thake, *Flight*, gouache, 1934, destroyed, photograph in Thake family collection

Leon Battista Alberti, who in 1435 described his canvas as being ‘an open window through which the subject to be painted is seen’.<sup>8</sup> With the charming *Inside looking out* (1934, destroyed), Thake employs this concept literally, the borders of the painting serving as the window frame, through which we see a mundane suburban rooftop (the view from his mother’s kitchen; see opposite).<sup>9</sup> We must imagine the brown holland blind, the pale-brown spots on the white curtains, the blue sky and the blueish ‘eyes’ on the moth’s wings.<sup>10</sup> Yet Thake intends no deception; it is readily apparent that the fabrics are stylised, the elements carefully composed, as with the window blind’s cord placed off-centre to parallel the chimney. Thake’s pleasure in a thoughtful title is evident from an early stage: is he referring to the moth futilely beating its wings against the glass or to us, the viewers, as being ‘inside, looking out’? While this painting may seem mild and quietly entertaining today, it was confronting at the time, a reviewer describing it as incomprehensible, ‘one of those insoluble conundrums that nag at one during sleepless hours before the dawn’.<sup>11</sup> Today, such an attitude is the conundrum.

Yet a second painting of the same year, also destroyed, was undeniably difficult for contemporary viewers. *Flight* depicts metal hinges flying like released birds out of an angled window accompanied by an amorphous form draped with fluttering ribbons (see above). In this, the strong influence of

Edward Wadsworth is evident in the cool, flat paint application and the decidedly uncanny combination of objects.<sup>12</sup> In 1936, reviewer Harold Herbert described Thake's art as 'meaningless efforts ... of no artistic value at all', yet art critic Basil Burdett chose *Flight* to illustrate an extensive article, 'Australian art to-day', published in the international magazine *The Studio* in 1938.<sup>13</sup>

A variant on this theme, but entering by a window rather than escaping, is the gouache *Happy landing* (1939, National Gallery of Australia), in which two twisted forms, like frangipani flowers or propellers, approach a white 'landing strip' positioned on a stark stone window sill.<sup>14</sup> In this apparently abstract image Thake expressed joy in his growing family: the closer form, just touching down, represents his daughter Joan; the further, floating in the blue sky, is his child yet to be born (Jenny).<sup>15</sup>

This intensely surreal decade culminated in Thake's *Salvation from the evils of earthly existence* (1940, National Gallery of Victoria) being jointly awarded (with Sydney artist James Gleeson, and judged by Gino Nibbi) the Contemporary Art Society's prize for 'new expressions of thought in art'. Presented to the National Gallery of Victoria, and accepted only after vehement opposition by the director JS MacDonald and some gallery trustees, the two artists' paintings became the first surrealist art to enter Australian institutional collections.<sup>16</sup> As World War II continued to impact on Melbourne life and Australian art, however, Thake's art took a more muted direction, although it continued to be pervaded by the slightly odd, the gently unsettling.

In the early 1940s, and in dramatic contrast to his recent paintings, Thake embarked on a series of views of shopfronts in Melbourne's grid of streets. He later recalled, 'My interest in shop windows and their contents springs from the end of WWI when I first started work ... not the fashionable shops of Melbourne but those old dusty ones ... in those days [on] the outer edge of the city'.<sup>17</sup>

In 1942 Thake created four small, almost-square paintings: two of these depict shops in Little Bourke Street, the heart of Melbourne's Chinese quarter (both State Library Victoria; see opposite); the other two, a cafe in Little Collins Street, incongruously named The Unique Café, and Alfred Vella's 'superior' fish-and-chip shop in Lonsdale Street (both private collection). These are some of his most detailed paintings. Meticulous attention is paid to the ageing Victorian shopfronts, the slope of the footpaths, the diverse signwriting and its placement on the window panes, and the various wares displayed within: porcelain vases and figurines, fireworks, watermelon enticingly sliced or a sparse display of fish, with tiny flags propped in a bottle to invite visiting American and British servicemen inside. No people are present, either passing



Eric Thake, *Chinese shop, Little Bourke St*, oil enamel on board, 1942, Pictures Collection, State Library Victoria, H2006.146/2

by or within the shops; indeed, the interiors of three are dark, with only Vella's fish shop illuminated, its door open to reveal a stag's head mounted on the facing wall, an unexpected note even if real. Although a larger series of such paintings was planned, only these four were completed: they are now important records of Melbourne life at the time.<sup>18</sup>

Similarly intimate scenes of urban life were recorded by young British artists and designers such as Eric Ravilious and Edward Bawden (both students of Paul Nash). In 1938 Ravilious and author JM Richards published *High Street*, a small book beautifully illustrated with colour lithographs showing English shop displays including books, hardware, butchered meats, second-hand goods, tailored clothes and fireworks for Guy Fawkes Night. It seems likely that Thake saw this book – perhaps through the Leonardo Art Shop. However, it is certain that he saw and appreciated the art of American designer Witold Gordon, who was commissioned to create a series of gouaches for an article, 'New York shops you never see', published in *Vanity Fair* in July 1934; Thake owned a copy of this magazine.<sup>19</sup> The strong similarity between Gordon's and Thake's shop paintings, in the square format, tight focus, modern design aesthetic and absence of people, is notable.



Eric Thake, *The monument*, gouache on paper, 1956, whereabouts unknown, photographic slide in Thake family collection

With these exceptions, Thake's storefronts rarely focused on building facades, but rather on the windows – both the surface of the glazing and the interiors seen within. *Country tailor's shop* (1951) and *The wide boys* (1952, both National Gallery of Australia) show a close examination of window displays that entertained him, inviting us to be similarly amused. Thake later recalled how *The wide boys* was inspired by the ever-changing and unlikely combinations seen in 'Jack Silverman's Gents' Second Hand Clothes Shop, North of Lt Bourke St. East side of Russell St. Melb. Vic', as he carefully wrote on the work (see front cover). In a talk to fellow artists in 1963, Thake described the thought and design that went into this work, from sketching then refining the composition and altering the patterns and colours for tonal and colour balance to the placement of the blind's tassel as though it is a buttonhole.<sup>20</sup> The term *wide boys* was used at the time for fraudsters, gamblers, 'spivs' – wide in the sense of quick-witted, wide awake – yet Thake's double entendre plays on the double-breasted suits' breadth over height. *The wide boys* was exhibited in group shows in Melbourne, Adelaide and Sydney in 1952–53, noted by reviewers; it was



Eric Thake, *Self portrait in a broken shaving mirror*, gouache on paper, 1945, Australian War Memorial, ART96765

also illustrated in the Melbourne review.<sup>21</sup> The young John Brack's interest in shop windows started around this time and was similarly inspired by the rich offerings in Melbourne stores, as in his drawing *Mannequins* and oil painting *Men's wear* (both 1953, National Gallery of Australia).<sup>22</sup>

In one of his more ambiguous postwar gouaches, Thake captured both the interior of a shop and reflections in its window. *The monument* (1956, whereabouts unknown) shows a towering white wedding cake raised on a doily-frilled stand, which contrasts with the small, dark-robed figures confidently led by the dachshund; the wooden base of the display blends amorously with the stonework of the edifice, while the woodgrain seems to mock the shadowy trees (see opposite). This spatial ambiguity means that we, the viewers, are simultaneously seeing both what is before and (apparently) behind us, looking both through the transparent glass and into a mirror. And which is the monument: the cake or the dominant building?<sup>23</sup>

Thake had explored mirrored surfaces previously, during his wartime service. Thake was too young to fight in World War I, too old for active



Eric Thake, *Kamiri searchlight*, gouache and black ink on paper, 1945, National Gallery of Australia, 73.19

service in World War II, but in November 1943 he enlisted in the RAAF and was employed as a draughtsman on aircraft designs. With recognition of his artistic ability, in October 1944 he was reclassified pilot officer and appointed as an RAAF war artist for the Historical Records Section. Instructed simply to 'record in the field the activities of the RAAF',<sup>24</sup> Thake had complete freedom to select his own priorities, subjects, output and itineraries. This period, until he was demobilised in March 1946, was the only time he worked as a full-time artist, and it was to be his only travel overseas. He undertook two tours: through Queensland and New Guinea to Noemfoor and Morotai islands, in the Netherlands East Indies (December 1944 – March 1945), and via Alice Springs and Darwin to Koepang and Penfoei, in Timor (July–November 1945). Thake was tremendously stimulated by this opportunity; moreover, he was participating in work in which British artists whom he admired were simultaneously involved. A major exhibition of British war pictures had toured Australia in 1943, allowing Thake to see these contemporary responses to the war at first hand.<sup>25</sup> Upon reaching Port Moresby in late 1944, he wrote,

Yesterday we went out to a big salvage dump of aircraft about seven miles [11 kilometres] away ... and I hardly know where to start. The place needs a Paul Nash, [John] Piper, [Graham] Sutherland or an Eric Thake to do it justice, I'd like to have a studio out here for a few weeks.<sup>26</sup>



Eric Thake, *Still life in the dry interior*, oil on canvas, 1966, whereabouts unknown, photographic slide in Thake family collection

While sketching avidly and painting numerous gouache paintings depicting the twisted metal of crashed planes, the gaping ruins of shattered buildings, Thake also painted two self-portraits. *Self portrait in a broken shaving mirror* (1945, Australian War Memorial) is probably the most psychologically intimate self-image he created, his face, yellowed by atabrine antimalarial tablets, reflected and fractured by the jagged shards of mirror, both he and it shattered by the impact of war (see page 15). Yet, as with most of his art, he avoids intense emotion: the image is lightened by the ever-present millipede and grasshopper, tropical foliage behind him evoking the mundane (like the daily task of shaving) and the continuity of the natural world despite human intervention.

In contrast to the intimate shaving scene, in *Kamiri searchlight* (1945, Australian War Memorial and National Gallery of Australia), Thake shows the machinery of warfare, both wreckage on the broad beach and a massive American anti-aircraft searchlight that dominates the foreground (see page 16). Thake's strong affinity for the mysterious littoral paintings of Edward Wadsworth is again evident here, and he later said, 'I immediately knew when I saw the searchlight that it was a brother to Wadsworth's painting' *Wings of the morning* (1927), which he greatly admired.<sup>27</sup> The unexpected inversion of the expansive sandy beach reflected in the giant lens helps to hide the artist himself, who – once noticed – seemingly hangs upside down with his sketchpad before him, a tiny fighter plane like a mosquito in the sky both behind and below him.<sup>28</sup>

In 1946 the RAAF toured an exhibition of its artists' output to state galleries, where Thake's paintings and drawings were seen by many thousands of Australians; they were then distributed among state and regional galleries.<sup>29</sup> The Australian War Memorial was given 12 drawings by Thake of Japanese prisoners of war, and five gouaches, including *Kamiri searchlight*. It was one of a small number of scenes that Thake painted twice (both in 1945); the original was later acquired from him by the National Gallery of Australia. This striking composition is now probably his best-known painting and was selected as the cover image for *The Oxford History of the British Empire*, volume 4, *The Twentieth Century* (1999).

Upon his return to civilian life, Thake resumed his job with advertising firm Paton's, where he had been since 1926. He moved in 1956 to the University of Melbourne's Visual Aids Department and remained there until his retirement. Thake's employment was always in or near the city, and he walked extensively during his lunchbreaks, invariably sketching and occasionally photographing. He advised fellow artists that they 'should always carry a small sketchbook or



Eric Thake, *Watching the brolgas, western Queensland*, linocut on paper, 1974,  
National Gallery of Australia, 75.655



Eric Thake, *Airstrip at night*, gouache on paper, 1945, Australian War Memorial, ART 26971

at least *something* in [their] pocket to draw on', be it 'an envelope, a blank page in a library book, the back of a cigarette packet or whatever's handy', as one could 'never tell when an idea will present itself'.<sup>30</sup> Reflective surfaces – as well as windows and doorways – appear repeatedly in his sketchbooks, showing his enjoyment in the distortion caused by curved surfaces. A self-portrait is seen in the metal dish covering his meal during a hospital visit,<sup>31</sup> and in *High rise, Carlton* (1969, Geelong Gallery) the towering buildings proliferating through the inner suburbs are reflected in a highly polished car roof, the sense of their height emphasised by the tilted pose of the viewer behind, arms outstretched for balance (see back cover).

Another reflective surface Thake observed was the ubiquitous brown beer bottle. In *Still life in the dry interior* (1966, whereabouts unknown), Thake's nose and chin are distorted and enlarged by the curve of the long neck (see page 17). Although he often inserted himself into his later paintings and prints, his presence may not be noticed at first glance – or may even be missed altogether, to the viewer's detriment. And here, once again, the title offers a humorous twist: both the landscape and the bottle are dry. In 1966 Thake returned to oil paint, putting aside gouache, with which he had painted since the war. He also held his second solo show in this year, 19 years after his first: *Still life* was one of the works exhibited.<sup>32</sup>

While he never travelled overseas again, Thake had been inspired by his wartime experience through Central Australia, and he undertook several trips to outback towns throughout the country in his later years. Photographs – a medium which he explored further from the 1950s<sup>33</sup> – and sketches provided the source material for a number of his laconic Christmas cards, such as *She's warm alright* (1966, various collections), as well as a body of paintings. Thake often sketched the landscapes he saw, with his supreme economy of line and stylish design sensibility, but he chose not to work up such sketches into paintings.<sup>34</sup> Instead, the sources of inspiration for his finished works were the country pubs that he and his companions retreated to from the sun, providing shade and beer, and adorned with gold-leaf lettering on the windows, worn by decades of dust and heat. Lettering had been an important part of Thake's early commercial art work, and he retained a great interest in it, and an admiration for 'those now-forgotten outback sign writers'.<sup>35</sup>

One window he particularly appreciated was at Middleton in western Queensland, and its ornately lettered, reversed 'BAR' became the central feature in the large linocut *Watching the brolgas, western Queensland* (1974, various collections; see page 19).<sup>36</sup> From a darkened interior, holding pot and pencil, Thake (or we, the viewer as artist) sketches the glare outside, featureless except for a derelict car and a pair of brolgas, one melding with the font, the other perfectly, centrally poised. Yet inevitably this too was carefully composed; the first sketch, dated 21 September 1971, shows that the brolgas were seen below, rather than through, the lettering, and Thake told of the scorn with which his request for a glass was met: 'What's wrong with yer, can't yer drink outa the tin?'<sup>37</sup> Remarkably, this lettering still survives on the pub's windows, the elderly publicans now the only inhabitants of the remote town.<sup>38</sup>

While Thake was always praised as a colourist for his 'truly rare sense of delicate color',<sup>39</sup> he was also masterly with his use of a single line to capture volume, movement and posture. This is evident in his sketches, his abundant later drawings of birds and animals and his refined linocuts. Thake had been one of the first artists in Australia to explore the possibilities of linoleum as a printing matrix, showing in the groundbreaking *Exhibition of Linocuts* in Melbourne in 1930 with artists including Dorrit Black, Eveline Syme and Ethel Spowers. He rarely printed in colour, preferring the single block, cleanly cut and (after his earliest prints) with minimal texture. Throughout his life Thake was captivated by silhouettes: he recalled admiring some in a school magazine as a child and being fascinated even by the word.<sup>40</sup> The use of positive and negative space and careful placement are of course critical in advertisements – for both words and images – and are equally important in art.



Eric Thake, *Jenny's ninth birthday card*, gouache and pen and ink on card, 1949, collection of Jeni Beaty

Thake's Christmas card for 1964, *Sunshine and rain, Lygon St* (various collections), uses silhouettes in both black and white to compare the wares displayed in a shop window with the reality, the elegantly angled calf of the mannequin with the plodding shoe of the woman departing right, laden with her shopping basket (see page 7). The curves of the various shoulders so simply convey the stance of the man (Thake himself) and the age of the woman; and, between them, Thake creates another form that, once seen, is hard to unsee.

It is unsurprising that, in addition to clear, descriptive silhouettes, Thake explored elongated shadows cast by raking light. Such shadows – mysterious, amorphous and often menacing – were widely used by surrealist artists such as Salvador Dali in his desert-like landscapes and, particularly, Giorgio de Chirico, whose shadow-striped arcades and empty piazzas influenced many Australian artists, for whom such expansive spaces are plentiful. From evoking unsettling explorations of the subconscious, the use of sharply angled lighting soon became widespread in contemporary photography and film, and from there moved into the mainstream media. While shadows featured little in Thake's 1930s surrealist art, the intensity of lighting on dark (and blackout-darkened) nights attracted his attention during the war, resulting in several gouaches he painted in Alice Springs. These included *Revolving beacon, Alice Springs* (1945, Art Gallery of South Australia), in which his elongated shadow stretches along the uninterrupted expanse of the air force runway, and others, such as *Airstrip at night* (1945, Australian War Memorial), in which light streaming from windows and doorways casts patterns of figures and frames in some of his most disconcerting, dreamlike scenes (see page 20).

In contrast, and on a much more personal note, Thake also used cast shadows on birthday cards that he drew for his daughters. For Jo[an]'s 13th birthday, Thake painted her shadow approaching a ladder resting against a wall, its own shadow somewhat concealing the discarded banana skin, bad luck waiting if she were to walk under the ladder. In another, the young Jenny stands at a window, arm raised, looking out at the rising sun (see opposite). In return, the sun casts a shadow onto the table behind her, in the shape of a number 9, her age that day.

Through his diverse, distinctive, accomplished and often entertaining art, Eric Thake reminds us of the importance of observation, the pleasure that can be found in the unexpected, in having 'an uncommon view of common things'.<sup>41</sup> In her opening speech for Thake's retrospective exhibition in 1970, friend and collector Elizabeth Summons spoke of Thake's aim 'not to puzzle but to share his discoveries'.<sup>42</sup> Thake invites us into his art, to look through his window on the world, and it is a rewarding view.