

# Large, friable and unglazed: display systems recently used at the National Gallery of Victoria

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## ABSTRACT

In 2012 and 2013, the National Gallery of Victoria (NGV) displayed a number of artworks comprised of friable media that were not to be exhibited in the traditional framed manner and required problem-solving in their preparation. Two of these artworks were of large scale and glazing wasn't to be included. Different systems were used for each, some devised by others and adaptations made. This paper outlines the factors taken into account when deciding upon the systems, thoughts about their success and possible future improvements.

**Keywords** unglazed, friable, display system

## INTRODUCTION

Display of artworks has commonly been an aspect of the paper conservator's role to greater or lesser extent, however in the last half decade it has presented more challenges and required more innovative thinking and options. As artists have been experimenting with materials and construction methods, they have of course also been experimenting with ways in which they want their audiences to engage with their artworks.

In the last two years the NGV has had a variety of paper based artworks displayed in non-conventional ways. For example in the current exhibition titled, Melbourne Now there are a group of four Laith McGregor drawings comprising one artwork that is displayed on the surface of a ping-pong table on which the public plays the game; and a Brian Martin charcoal drawing comprised of 30 sheets that is displayed on the ground with an acrylic sheet on top, with instruction that the audience is welcome to walk, stand or sit on it.

While there have been many examples to draw upon, this paper discusses the display systems devised and implemented for two artworks, produced using friable media that were on display at the NGV for exhibitions in 2012-13.

## CASE STUDY 1

The first artwork that required preparation was a drawing by Melbourne artist Tom Nicholson titled *Drawings and correspondence 1* (Figure 1). Nicholson was awarded a Creative Fellowship at the State Library of Victoria in 2007-08 and from this, a limited series of 8 charcoal drawings and a small scale artist's book were produced.

The NGV's drawing, the centrepiece and largest in the series, is based on a detail of an anonymous 1889 photograph in the archives of the State Library of Victoria, that depicts a decorated mia mia (shelter) in the Native Encampment display at the Melbourne Zoo. Nicholson's composition is focused on the cross beam of the mia mia's structure, and the faintly visible white figures painted on its dark inner wall. The beam crosses the top of the image, starkly white and hung with a



Figure 1. Tom NICHOLSON *Drawings and correspondence 1* (2008-11) Willow charcoal, compressed charcoal and white pastel on three sheets of paper 250 x 330 cm (image and sheet). National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne. Purchased from the Victorian Foundation for Living Australian Artists, 2011 (2011.415.a-c)

piece of fabric. Behind, in the gloom, are three faded white figures including two dancing people. The white rag, textured darkness and faded aspect of the figures suggest a sense of foreboding and mystery.

Nicholson has created this drawing using black willow charcoal, compressed charcoal and to a lesser extent white pastel. The media has been applied thickly and covers a vast majority of the paper. Fixative has been used, part way through the construction, however further charcoal was applied giving the beautiful velvet-like surface quality characteristic of charcoal and pastel. The drawing is produced on three rectangular sheets of paper, varying in size and assembles into an irregular shape. This irregular shape, measures approximately 350 x 250cm.

It was not long after the purchase of this significant drawing by Nicholson that there was an opportunity for this artwork to be displayed. An NGV collection based exhibition titled, *Negotiating this World: Contemporary Australian Art from the National Gallery of Victoria* was proposed by curator Jane Devery and Nicholson's work was chosen to be included. Discussions began again with the curator and artist on the

display style to be utilised. It should be mentioned at this stage that the funds used to purchase this artwork were from the Victorian Foundation for Living Australian Arts (VFLAA) a Victorian Government Initiative whereby, amongst other criteria, artwork procured with this fund are made available for regional venues so they must be able to travel.

Given the size and shape of the drawing when constructed and aligned, the usual option of framing the artwork posed several problems. The choice of glazing type leaned towards glass rather than acrylic because of the quantity of soft loose surface particles and the knowledge that this drawing would be transported throughout its life. The NGV has two exhibiting venues and an off-site storage facility in addition to the possibility of the drawing being borrowed. Glazing and framing a large and irregular shaped artwork in its entirety would not only be enormously difficult, but also incredibly impractical with regard to moving the artwork between and around the buildings, in lifts, in trucks and in smaller regional venues. As laminated glass glazing is heavy and non-laminated glass has the risk of breakage, neither were deemed appropriate in this instance. Framing and glazing individual paper sheets was considered, however this did present the disadvantage of creating visual horizontal breaks in the image. Minimal framing with narrow black painted timber, excluding any glazing was considered as an option for ease of handling & minimal visual disruption. The narrowness would not be structurally sufficient to accommodate the reasonably weighty laminated glass, but would allow for ease of handling. However this still did cause visual breaks within the image and a further alternative was sought.

Drawing on two systems used at the NGV over the years, for artworks displayed in acrylic box frames and large format photographs, the plan was made to combine the two approaches and present Nicholson's drawing unframed.

Three backing panels were constructed by Senior Conservation Technician, Gervais Battour. These were made from a sheet of black Dibond®, an aluminium faced sheeting with light-weight core, attached to a timber frame-work with an appropriate number of cross braces. The timber frame-work was not directly attached to the Dibond®, but a small gap allowed with the insertion of washers. This was done deliberately to allow hinges to be threaded through at a later time. Each panel was exactly the same dimension as the relevant drawing. While it was still possible to turn the panels over onto their faces, Oz-clips® and d-rings were attached to the verso. This was carried out at this stage with a power-drill prior to the attachment of the drawings as it was imperative to minimize vibrations to the drawings. These panels were then stored on their sides, while Gervais continued to fit out the storage crate and hinges were attached to the drawings.

Japanese paper hinges made of kozo fibre, 39gsm, were attached at regular intervals around all edges (Figure 2). The hinges were 240mm wide and 300mm in length and there was an approximate gap of 80mm between each hinge. Wheat starch paste was used to attach the hinges to the verso coming in from the edge by approximately 15mm. The hinges were dried with glassine against the charcoal surface and blotter, glass and light weight above. Hollytex® and blotter were used below the sheet against the hinge and verso of artwork.



Figure 2. Central drawing with hinges attached. Foundation for Living Australian Artists, 2011 (2011.415.a-c)

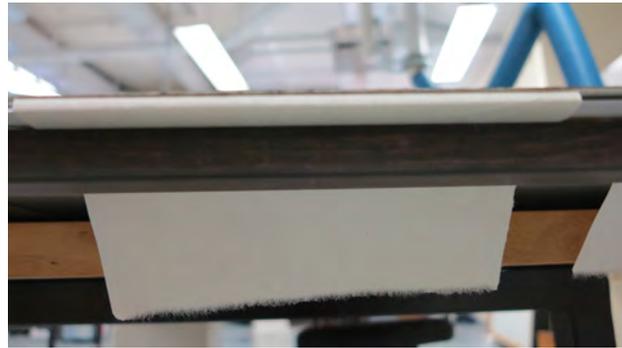


Figure 3. Detail of hinge threaded between Dibond® and timber frame-work.



Figure 4. Lower drawing with hinges beginning to be threaded.



Figure 5. Custom-made crate open to show unmounted panels within.

Once hinged, the artwork was placed on top of the designated panel. With one, or two edges of the panel over-hanging the edge of the worktable, the hinges were threaded through the gap left between the timber framework and the back of the Dibond® (Figures 3 and 4). When all the hinges were threaded, the opposite hinges were lightly tensioned keeping the drawing in alignment with the panel. The hinges were secured to the back of the panel with a strip of adhesive backed Velcro® which was attached to the end of the hinge.



Figure 6. Bea MADDOCK *TERRA SPIRITUS...with a darker shade of pale* (1993-98), Earth pigments and blind letterpress on 52 sheets, ed.3/5 (a-zz), 26.5 x 76.0 cm (image and sheet) (each), National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne. Purchased, 1999. (1999.190.a-zz). Section of the artwork displayed in 2013.

Gervais had completed the storage crate which all three panels would live within. Due to the three panels being relatively light in weight and to keep the storage foot-print to a minimum, a slightly enlarged handling frame was designed, purchased and fitted-out (Figure 5). The two larger panels are secured to the central timber frame with their Oz-clips® and the smaller of the panels is attached to the inner side of one of the Dibond® covers. The panels were tested for fit and ease of handling. The Oz-clips® are secured to the timber frame-work with wing-nut screws so once again vibration is minimized.

When all three drawings had been prepared we arranged for the artwork to be photographed. This was an opportunity to see the artwork hung vertically and a perfect occasion to document the steps for installation. The unfolded Oz-clips® were used to lift and handle the panels, in addition to careful handling of the timber frame-work behind. Felt circles were adhered to the timber frame-work in the lower corners of each panel to compensate the build-up from the Oz-clips® and d-rings, allowing each panel to sit in a flat planar state from the wall.

When the artwork was fully installed it became apparent that the system would be visually improved if the edges of the Dibond® and hinges were painted black. Following photography this was then carried out using Liquitex black acrylic paint.

## CASE STUDY 2

The second artwork that will be discussed in this paper is the beautiful panoramic *TERRA SPIRITUS: with a darker shade of pale...* 1993-98 by Bea Maddock (Figure 6). This extraordinary artwork, when fully installed, spans forty metres and is comprised of fifty-one sheets, plus imprint page, that depicts Tasmania's entire coastline as viewed from the sea, as it had been by Dutch, French and English explorers in the seventh and eighteenth centuries. The simplified lines of the land are reminiscent of topographical drawings made to aid navigation. It is one of an edition of five and is a skilful combination of drawing and printing techniques. It is produced using red ochre, significant for its sacred use by indigenous communities, which Maddock mined herself, ground and made into drawing sticks and used. Blind letter-press is used to provide the English place-name, while the indigenous names are larger and are added in beautifully regular cursive script with the drawing sticks. Incising has also been carried out in this artwork.

Maddock is very much conscious of her choice of materials and also has clear views on how she prefers her work displayed. Maddock has had her own edition framed in a style that limits visual disruption between printed sheets. There are no timber vertical ends on the frames that a-butt one another except at the final ends of the panorama. Maddock is open to the panorama being displayed looking inwards from gallery walls, as well as around a central built structure, in essence replicating the element of circumnavigation to the artwork. She is also open to a portion of the artwork being displayed, rather than the complete fifty-one sheets, although she prefers a reasonable number of the pages to be displayed to give a representation of the scale and meaning of the artwork.

In the latter half of 2013, the NGV held an exhibition of works of art by Bea Maddock, curated by Alisa Bunbury (2013), whereby *TERRA SPIRITUS: with a darker shade of pale...* was displayed. While we had acquired our *TERRA SPIRITUS: with a darker shade of pale...* in 1999 it had never been displayed. On a previous occasion we had borrowed Maddock's own edition and indeed we did consider this option again for the 2013 exhibition, for storage reasons. However, it was preferable to display our own edition and for this reason we used the method described below which was based on a system devised by Jeffrey Warda, Assistant Paper Conservator at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York.

In 2007 the NGV hosted an exhibition titled, *Guggenheim Collection: 1940's to Now* whereby a group of 36 chromogenic photographs from the series *Tree Planting* by Sarah Ann Johnson were included. They were displayed unframed and on a wall that was curved in a concave fashion. Jeffrey had devised a system whereby the photographs were hinged and then clamped to the wall by strips of mount-board that were stapled to the wall.

The same system was put forward for *TERRA SPIRITUS: with a darker shade of pale...* After making a small mock-up of the Warda system (Warda 2007) and discussions with a Senior Art Handler the system was presented to the curator who readily accepted it. The advantage of the system for Bea Maddock's artwork was that it addressed both aesthetic and storage considerations in what appeared to be an attractive manner.

Japanese paper hinges made of Kozo fibre, 39 gsm, were attached at intervals to the panorama, along the upper edge on the verso. The width was determined by the size of the sheet. Four hinges were attached to a *TERRA SPIRITUS: with a darker shade of pale...* sheet which measures 265 x 760mm. The length of the hinges, were approximately 20-30mm shorter than the height of the sheet when folded backwards.

The artwork was then returned to its' custom-made box for storage awaiting the exhibition. It should be mentioned at this stage that Bea Maddock commissioned fellow book binder, Keith Atkins from Tasmania to custom-make archival storage boxes for the five sets of *TERRA SPIRITUS: with a darker shade of pale...*

Strips of 4ply archival mount-board were cut, 100mm wide and 740mm long which is approximately 20mm shorter than the width of the sheet. One of the longer edges, over which the hinge would fold, was gently sanded and burnished to eliminate any sharp edges. This edge was then indicated with an arrow pencil marking. Further markings were added to show where the mount-board strip should be screwed, to avoid the hinges.

At the time the exhibition was to be installed, the walls were marked out with the intention that the panorama was to be hung without gaps between. It had been important, with unglazed work such as this, to consider the positioning in the early stages of the exhibition planning. It needed to be on a wall that was not a thoroughfare and sufficient distance allowed between the end of the artwork and the end of the wall. A floor plinth was also stipulated for the artwork.

The mount-board strips were screwed in place, not too tightly, and the screw head was counter-sunk. Once the strips had been hung it was possible to start hanging the artworks. Each sheet was placed on a sheet of card, of similar size and the hinges were unfolded to hang over the edge (Figure 7). One conservator held the card and artwork up to the wall at a right-angle, while the second conservator threaded the hinges through the mount-board strip (Figure 8). Once threaded, the card and artwork were lowered and card moved away. Adjustment was possible by gently pulling the artwork left or right and by carefully going below the sheet and tightening the hinge.

The paper of *TERRA SPIRITUS: with a darker shade of pale...* was responsive to changes in relative humidity, and an unfortunate increase at the beginning of the exhibition period, caused it to very slightly kick-out in the lower corners. Small v-hinges were attached to the lower corners and edges where they began to kick out and were secured to the wall with double-sided tape.

The outcome of this method of display was highly successful for this artwork as it gave a very elegant, uninterrupted appearance. Preparation for this system was simple, attaching long hinges and cutting mount-board strips, and it was straight forward to both install and de-install. Removing the sheets from the wall was a reversed process. The additional advantage was the minimal storage space required. With *TERRA SPIRITUS: with a darker shade of pale...* the artwork was able to be retained in its original custom-made box.

Since the display of the Bea Maddock artwork, the same system has been used on three more occasions. It has been used for a David McDiarmid poster, a Laith McGregor drawing measuring over four metres long and four large linocuts by print-maker Tama K. Favell.

With the larger artworks by McGregor and Favell, installation was more complicated logistically, however the outcome remained attractive. We will endeavour to improve the process of installation but may have to think of another alternative for large scale artworks.

The McGregor drawing was carried out on reasonably thick paper manufactured on a roll. The drawing was undertaken over a seven month period as the artist travelled between New York, Berlin, Barcelona, Bangkok, Bali and Melbourne, in which time McGregor repeatedly rolled and stored the artwork in a cylinder so that the paper had a strong memory. This made it difficult to coax the paper into a flat planar state before the install and consequently it was necessary to use tiny



Figure 7. Removing the prepared sheets of *TERRA SPIRITUS: a darker shade of pale...* in readiness for hanging.



Figure 8. Threading the hinges through previously secured mount-board strips.

white painted magnets on the left & right edges for this display. Small Japanese paper v-hinges were used along the lower edge and double-sided taped to the wall. In the future we would use v-hinges along the left and right edges for consistency.

The Tama K Favell linocuts, that measure 106 x 198 cm, were printed on paper hand-made by the artist. This paper is long-fibred and has the appearance of tapa cloth or an oriental paper. Given that the paper is reasonably light weight and semi-opaque we decided to use acrylic strips in exchange for the mount-board strips, so that they weren't visible. The acrylic didn't grip the hinges as well and it was necessary to use double-sided tape along the bottom of the hinge to attach to the wall. In the future we could look at alternative options for giving the acrylic surface some grip, however our intentionally long hinges can easily sacrifice being trimmed by 10mm each display for many years to come.

## CONCLUSION

While there have been many examples to draw upon for this paper, and more having arisen since initially proposed, this paper discusses the display systems devised and used for two artworks in particular. Both artworks are constructed using friable media and both are of large scale. While the systems are not overly complicated and have developed from other systems, it is hoped that this paper may be useful for other paper and photograph conservators facing similar challenges. These systems will continue to be adapted and completely new systems will no doubt been designed as contemporary artists push traditional boundaries further.

## REFERENCES

Bunbury, A 2013, *Bea Maddock*, National Gallery of Victoria Publications, Melbourne.

Warda, J 2007, unpublished installation instructions, *Guggenheim Collection: 1940's to Now* Exhibition held at the National Gallery of Victoria, 2007, Melbourne.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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## MATERIALS

### Japanese Kozo paper – RK27

Paper Nao, 4-37-28 Hakusan, Bunkyo-ku, Tokyo 112-001, Japan, tel: +81 (3) 3944 4470

### Glassine

double-sided tape and Mylar® enclosures: Archival Survival, PO Box 2394, Hawthorne, VIC 3122 tel:1300 78 11 99

### Blotting paper

University Products Inc., the Archival Company, email [custserv@universityproducts.com](mailto:custserv@universityproducts.com)

### Hollytex® (thin)

Talas, 5th Floor, 20 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011, tel +1 212 219 0770

### Dibond®

Alucobond Architectural, A division of Halifax Vogel Group Pty Ltd VIC tel: (03) 9394 3130 [info@alucobond.com.au](mailto:info@alucobond.com.au) [www.alucobond.com.au](http://www.alucobond.com.au)

### Wheat starch (glacier)

Weston Bioproducts, 89 Pinnacle Road, Altona North, VIC 3025 tel: (03) 9360 3600

### Liquitex Acrylic paint

Melbourne Etching Supplies Pty Ltd, 33A St David Street, Fitzroy, VIC 3065, tel: (03) 9419 5666

### Velcro®

Velcro Australia Pty Ltd, 5-11 David Lee Road, Hallam, VIC 3803, tel: (03) 9703 2466 fax: (03) 9703 2305

### Oz-clips®

T.E.D. Melbourne, VIC tel: (03) 9687 6552

## AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Ruth Shervington graduated from Camberwell College of Arts, London in 1993 with a BA (Hons) degree in paper conservation. Ruth worked in London for three years as a paper conservator before taking up a position as Art Foundation of Victoria development conservator of paper at the National Gallery of Victoria between 1996 –1999. Ruth then moved into the position of paper conservator between 1999 and 2006 and from this date onwards has been senior conservator of paper at the National Gallery of Victoria.

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