

Presentation Abstracts

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A burning question: investigating stretcher stains on a painting by Paddy Bedford

Lightning talk

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Last year, a recent acquisition, *Untitled*, by Paddy Bedford arrived in the Conservation lab at the National Gallery of Australia (NGA) for a condition report. During the examination of the painting it was noted that there was brown staining on exposed areas of the acrylic gesso ground over the stretcher bars. Stains were particularly evident in the corners over the mitred joins in the stretcher.

Paddy Bedford was a Gija artist from the East Kimberley region of Western Australia who was in his late 70s when he began painting in 1998. Bedford painted on canvas, board and paper. His canvases, which were prepared for him, were of Belgian linen mostly on stretchers measuring 122mm x 135mm or 150mm x 180mm in either portrait or landscape orientation. His materials included natural ochres in synthetic polymer and commercial acrylic paints. Texture was added by the use of materials such as brick dust (MCA, 2006). The painting in question was a typical Belgian linen canvas on a 122 x 135mm 6 member Colour Square cedar stretcher. The tension was loose and no keys were present.

In case damage from the stretcher was continuing, it was decided to remove the canvas from its support and seal the stretcher with aluminium framers' tape. This is a treatment often undertaken by the NGA's Conservation Framer, Greg Howard, when stretching unrolled canvases or replacing inadequate supports. During this treatment staining of the canvas was clearly visible. A check with A-D strips confirmed that these areas were slightly acidic compared to controls, particularly in the top left corner on the verso. No water stains were present.

Staining from acidic secondary supports is not an unusual phenomenon. It is most often seen on the verso of canvases and occasionally on the recto of raw canvas. Sometimes it is associated with water damage. Less common is such obvious staining of the ground or paint layer. Why had this happened? Was it the only one of Bedford's paintings to be so affected? It was decided to investigate whether or not such damage was part of a pattern or just an isolated occurrence.

A search of Bedford's works began with the Museum of Contemporary Art's (MCA) catalogue of a retrospective of the artist's work in 2006 (Bedford and Storer, 2006). The catalogue contains an illustrated list of most of his paintings up to that time. Apart from a few of his very early works, all of the paintings on canvas bear a number including the month, year and chronological number. The painting in question was dated May of 2006. Using the list as a guide, as many images as possible of his paintings were checked on line and in publications. If this method of inquiry can be trusted, staining is not a common phenomenon on Bedford's canvases. Of the few found to have marks visible in images all, except for one painted in 2003, concentrated around March and May 2006.

Several reasons for this concentration were considered: the artist's materials and techniques; the ambient conditions in which the canvases were stored by the artist before, during and after they were painted; and the manner in which they were stored.

Inquiries to date indicate the last two factors are most likely. A check of weather conditions in the East Kimberley during 2006 revealed that cyclones and flooding occurred during March which would have subjected canvases present in the area at the time to hot and extremely humid conditions. The habit of stacking canvases together may also have contributed to the damage (Bedford and Storer, 2006, p.9).

References:

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Acknowledgments: Greg Howard, Conservation framer, NGA

Sharon Alcock has been a Paintings Conservator at the National Gallery of Australia since 2008. Prior to that she performed contract work for the National Gallery of Australia, The Australian War Memorial and Museum Services Australia Pty Ltd.