



Hannah Barrett (left) assists Sally Smart in preparing the puppet elements of Choreography

SMART SOLUTIONS

Behind-the-scenes at the National Gallery of Australia with Textile Conservators Hannah Barrett and Carmela Mollica

This detailed case study describing the exhibition of a large and intricate work by artist Sally Smart takes us step-by-step through a painstaking process—from acquisition to display and finally storage of a complex contemporary artwork.

The choreography of cutting (the pedagogical puppet projects) by Australian artist SALLY SMART was purchased and installed by the National Gallery of Australia in October 2015 as part of the gallery renovations which took place in late 2015. The work, measuring 7.5 x 4 m,

is a contemporary multimedia installation consisting of synthetic polymer paint, conté crayon, oil pastel and pencil on canvas, and paper, fabric, wood, cardboard and various collage elements with a flat screen monitor. The particular issue facing the conservation team with this work was the subsequent storage of the very large painted backdrops and card collage pieces that were annotated in conté crayon by the artist in her workshop prior to acquisition as well as during the installation of the artwork at the NGA.

Through experimentation and collaboration between the various departments of the NGA, a solution was devised

Working with artists on extremely large, complex contemporary multimedia art pieces poses challenges for conservators today.



Arthur Streeton (Australia, England, Australia, b.1867, d.1923) *Blue Mountain tunnel* (incorrectly inscribed 1892 (1891), pencil, watercolour, Chinese white highlights on paper, 73 x 58.5 cm, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Gift of Howard Hinton, 1917, Photo: GNSW 6416)

The NGA Textile Conservation team discuss the work *Choreography* with artist Sally Smart

Choreography is a contemporary multimedia installation measuring 7.5 x 4 m consisting of four large canvas backdrops making up the base of the work, with paper, fabric, wood, cardboard and various collage elements, and with a flat screen monitor. The backdrop has been painted with black 'blackboard' paint onto which Smart has made annotations,

diagrams and text relating to the theme of the work 'Dance', using synthetic polymer paint, conté crayon, oil pastel and pencil. These annotations were carried out before acquisition as well as during installation. The crayon, like chalk, is very friable, producing 'dust' and smudging freely—part of the effect intended by the artist.

Storage Issue

The primary issue facing the NGA Conservation team with this structurally large and complicated work was the de-installation and subsequent storage of the painted backdrops and accompanying card collage elements that were also annotated by the artist using conté crayon. The backdrop pieces, coupled with the numerous collage parts and sculptural elements, meant planning and careful consideration of various storage methods was essential. The length of time the work was on display provided the relevant stakeholders with significant lead time for assessment, testing and implementation of a storage method that would suit this large work whilst protecting the fragile and friable surface.

Light Exposure Considerations

The second issue concerning Conservation staff was the effect of light on the work. *Choreography* was initially planned to be displayed on the west wall of Gallery 1A which formed part of the new contemporary Australian art space. There were concerns, however, expressed by the Senior Curator Australian Paintings and Sculpture, Dr. Deborah Hart, as well as the artist herself, that the wall space allocated to *Choreography* was not large enough to display the work as Smart had envisaged it. As the date for installation of the work drew closer, amendments were made to the layout of the gallery space that meant the Smart work was moved to the east wall of Gallery 1A—a much larger display area and a more visually striking position. This gave Smart more freedom to develop and grow the piece into the final display.

Choreography takes up almost an entire gallery wall, facing but a fair distance from, the large open foyer area, previously the NGA main entrance prior to refurbishment, which is fronted by floor to ceiling glass windows. These windows and glass doors are covered with UV filtering film and have motorised blinds that are used primarily in spring and autumn afternoons. In addition, the work contains three hanging 'puppets' which, when lit (by direction of the artist), cast eerie and fascinating shadows on the main body of the work. As light, in particular the play of light and shadow, is an integral part of this piece, it was important to ensure the balance between artist's intent and conservation concerns were met during the installation and display period.

Working with Artists

Working with artists on extremely large, complex contemporary multimedia art pieces poses challenges for conservators today. Keeping a balance between the artist's intent and the preservation



Carmela Mollica inspects one of the large backdrop pieces for *Choreography* on the roll as it arrived at the NGA

of the work, whilst considering all aspects such as display and long-term storage, are challenges that face the conservation profession. It can be uncomfortable to approach the topic of ownership with an artist when trying to explain working methodologies and defining boundaries. Most often in the conservation profession objects are dealt with after the fact in terms of creation and inception: the particular challenge with *Choreography* was the ongoing development and creation of the work.

As contemporary art grows stronger in collections, especially work containing 'modern' and often volatile or disposable materials, and/or simultaneously installed and created pieces, collaborating with artists in 'real' time grows more integral to the role of conservator. When *Choreography* was installed Smart was present from beginning to end, and a balance was effected whereby she was given artistic freedom to continue to produce the work; however she would consult and negotiate compromise where necessary during the process.

Having worked alongside a number of NGA staff with other installations of her work over a number of years, Smart had developed a rapport of trust and respect.

This meant that in discussions between artist and conservator (and often artist, curator and conservator) Smart responded well to advice and suggestions made by conservation staff. The mutual goal was preservation of the artwork for the future without changing the artist's intentions for the piece. Open dialogue ensured full explanation as to why certain restrictions were imposed by conservation staff. It was also important during this time for conservators to be prepared to let go of some reservations and allow the artist space and freedom to create. This reciprocal working process ensured that all parties came away from the experience with their individual desired results and a positive outlook. By recognising that all involved wanted the best for the work—either visually or physically—it was much easier to reach agreement about working methods and use of materials.

Installation of the Work

During the installation over a period of one week, four Exhibition installers worked with four Textile Conservators, the curator and the artist. The first task was to hang the four large background panels, each measuring roughly 4 x 2.1 m. A scissor lift was used to elevate two installers to map out the parameters of the work on the gallery wall. The artist and curator were then able to visualise the space. Once positioning was established, the scissor lift was used to elevate one textile conservator and two installers into position to begin to mount, one at a time, the large backdrop pieces. Each panel had been temporarily rolled onto a tube to allow for ease of installation.

The team working in the scissor lift were handed each roll from the ground team. The lift was elevated to meet the mapped line indicating the top edge of the work. The textile conservator and installers gradually unrolled the panel, which was then held in place while Smart directed any alterations to the position. Once this was confirmed the panel was tacked into place using black nails removed from brass picture hooks. These nails were tacked in using nail holes created by the artist when the work was previously hung. The four panels were hung in this way, each one overlapping the next by differing amounts corresponding to the text alignment of each panel (working from left to right). At this point the final panel, which was slightly narrower and shorter than the other three, required the addition of a small section to make its length equal to the others. Smart had anticipated this and had brought an extra section of pre-painted canvas to be cut down to size and adhered in place. This was done in situ in the gallery space. Smart was very receptive to the conservation team being involved with any interventions of this kind. She allowed textile conservators to cut the piece to size and adhere it using conservation grade adhesive.

Once all the panels were hung Smart was able to begin her creative process by indicating which mixed media pieces she would like and where they would be placed. The additional elements were tacked into position by one of the installers and by Smart herself. When all the collage pieces were in place Smart worked across the entire piece making additional annotations, diagrams and text using conté crayon. These additions were not treated with fixative as the original work had been. Fixing the new annotations was discussed with the artist. She provided the conservation team with a brand of commercial fixing agent she had used on the rest of the work. Commercial fixing agent is not something the Conservation Department at the NGA would ordinarily consider using with a work of art. Smart was happy to allow the conservation team to make a final decision on the fixing of the annotations when the work was to be de-installed.

On completion of the additional annotations, the puppet pieces of the work were hung. This took some time as each puppet had to be fixed using cabling high in the gallery's ceiling space. A number of changes were made to the positioning of the three puppets until Smart decided only two puppets would be included in this work. The final stage of the installation involved the lighting of the puppets to create shadows on the piece and running the media element to the work—a short film clip created by Smart containing imagery and performance.

Storage Considerations

The NGA has two art storage repositories: on site at the NGA and at an offsite facility located in Canberra. The majority of works are stored onsite at the NGA, particularly those works which are considered fragile and not suitable for travel. The offsite facility holds more robust and typically larger works, such as sculpture and oversized paintings, textiles and installation works.

There were a number of issues that had to be considered for storage. How would the components be stored: puppets, paper collages, TV screen and DVD? Fast developing media hardware creates storage and management issues. Is the flat screen monitor a vital piece of equipment that requires storage with the work for future exhibitions, or do we record the specifications and re-use the TV screen elsewhere?

The NGA has Audio Visual (AV) Guidelines: these guidelines are relatively new. An AV survey would normally be given to the artist and NGA departments—Registration and Curatorial—prior to the installation of an artwork, with questions about the management of the media hardware and other information, such as resolution specifications etc. A retrospective survey will be given to the artist, curator and Registration team. This will inform the NGA which approach should be taken.

When *Choreography* entered the collection the large blackboard canvas backdrops had arrived rolled and were not interleaved. This meant that some of the annotations and images executed with conté crayon and oil pastel on the black canvas had transferred onto the back of the canvas, diminishing the intensity of the images. During installation Smart not only added to the artwork but also outlined existing annotations.

Ideally larger textiles should be rolled and the larger the diameter of the roll the better. This will create a larger curvature for the textile, reducing the possibility of creases. Folding was also considered: if folding was chosen it would require padding, either with acid free tissue or covered Dacron rolls. Covered Dacron rolls would be the most appropriate system if folded. Textiles will eventually split along the fold line over time. This method would also require very large boxes, a large footprint in storage and would be difficult to store.

Different interleaving materials were assessed and a decision made. Due to the nature of the friable surface it was necessary to prevent the transference of the conté crayon, oil pastel and pencil imagery onto the back of the canvas when rolled. Materials assessed for interleaving were acid free tissue, fabric, Mylar®, silicone release paper, Japanese paper, white barrier paper and glassine. Although used widely in the conservation of documents Mylar®, silicone release paper and glassine were not considered suitable due to the static property and difficulty to manage if rolled. Interleaving with fabric is usually used for textiles. The main materials used are Parsilk (100% polyester with an antistatic finish), cotton sheeting, calico, and Japara. Although these materials are extremely smooth they were not considered as a continuous length of fabric would be difficult to manage, possibly creating drag across the surface of the canvas backdrop.

The final decision was to roll the backdrops on large diameter acid free rolls interleaved with 45 gsm Light Impressions watermarked acid free tissue. This tissue has passed the Photographic Activity Test (PAT). It is extremely smooth and the large sheets provide protection and at the same time are manageable.

NGA Paper Conservation staff were also consulted regarding the best materials to interleave the backdrops and small individual works on paper.

De-install

Choreography was de-installed in June 2016. There were a number of challenging issues to be considered before de-installing: logistics of condition reporting and accessioning the work, removing a large flat work from the gallery wall, storage of the large backdrops and the individual components, fixing the diagrams and annotations applied

by Smart during installation, and dealing with the media elements that were included in the artwork. The reverse process of the install was needed.

The pinned individual components of paper, fabric, wood and cardboard applied to the canvas backdrops were removed and catalogued. Before the work was individually packed for storage it had to undergo a process of fixing the annotations that were applied by the artist during installation. The fixative used was the one Smart had used prior to the artwork coming into the NGA collection. The fixative was solvent based matt finish and would dry clear, becoming a permanent coating. The decision to apply this commercial fixative—not a conservation approved coating—was also discussed, including the ethical issue. Although the artist had already used this fixative, the questions asked were: Do we continue the process using this solvent based fixative that will eventually yellow over time? Or do we consolidate the conté crayon with a conservation approved fixing agent? The decision was to continue with the artist's suggested materials, as she had already used the consolidant and would ensure the finish of the work remained consistent over time.

The next step was to determine where this would take place: in the exhibition space while still hanging on the wall, or rolled and moved to the large ventilated spray booth in the conservation lab? Moving the work to the conservation lab for treatment would require double handling, as it would require rolling each panel twice.

While the artist had offered to return to the NGA to complete the task of fixing the additional annotations, it was decided that this would not be a viable option for a number of reasons. The OH&S risk was of paramount importance. NGA Conservation staff are fully trained in the use of hazardous materials and follow Safe Working Practice guidelines. Though every precaution would be taken in conducting such a treatment, it was felt this would be better carried out by NGA Conservation staff. Also, if Smart returned to apply the fixing agent to the work, the cost of such a visit had not been factored into the Exhibition budget and so was not viable. Another factor was that the work, now acquired, belonged to the NGA. Under the NGA Care of the Collection guidelines conservation staff are responsible for the care and interventive treatments of NGA-owned artworks. Finally, to ensure the fixative was applied in a controlled even coat and in a consistent manner, it was felt that this would be better executed by NGA conservation staff at the time of de-installation.

Documentation and Accessioning

Along with the consolidation of the annotated areas on the backdrop, at this point it was also necessary

to undertake cataloguing, accessioning, conservation condition reporting and treatment documentation. These procedures are normally undertaken before the artwork is installed. In this instance they had not been carried out prior to installation due to the nature of the work being developed and completed during install. Defining the parts was not possible prior to installation. Not all the components were used on the artwork, some were returned to the artist.

Curatorial and Registration were required to assign a numbering system to best suit the work and catalogue it for future display. The two large hanging puppets were not only part of the overall work, but also stood as individual objects. Collaboration with Registration to determine the best storage method was discussed at length.

Conclusion

Working with artists often can be a difficult process as the typical working style of an artist can be in conflict with the practices and methodologies adopted by conservators. In this case both parties learnt to compromise and open dialogue served as a valuable tool in understanding the needs and requirements of artist and conservators.

Conservators must adapt to working with materials often previously outside their traditional repertoire, as well as under conditions not meeting set parameters of working practice. *Choreography* was a challenge that the Textile Conservation team met and successfully found a good solution for its installation, display, de-installation, treatment and storage. It was paramount that standards and procedures not be sacrificed to meet the needs of an artist to the detriment of the work. Compromises do need to be made, however these can occur without foregoing Care of the Collection principles through discussion, negotiation and understanding at setting common goals.

During the installation of *Choreography* film footage was taken as well as intensive photographic documentation of the process. Not only did this serve to document the event for posterity, it became, and will become, an invaluable tool for conservators as part of the object record, along with the traditional forms of recording information, such as condition reports and database records. As conservators working under new parameters with contemporary art, the conservation profession will need to develop and expand its recording methods to meet these changes and new challenges.

The storage of media—as an artwork in itself or as documentation for a piece—has become an integral part of the professional roles of Conservation and Registration. This development will form part of the future growth

of the conservation profession; continually pushing the boundaries of our working practices ensures the longevity of the conservation profession as a whole.

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Hannah Barrett and Camela Mollica

Right: Sally Smart working on *Choreography* during the installation

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Camela Mollica is a Textile Conservator at the National Gallery of Australia, having graduated from the CCAE (now University of Canberra) in 1986 with a Bachelor of Applied Science in the Conservation of Cultural Materials. Prior to joining the NGA Camela was the Senior Paper and Textile Conservator at the National Museum of Australia. She has also taught Museum Practice at TAFE and presented talks and workshops throughout her career.



References

National Gallery of Australia 2015, nga.gov.au/collections/AUSTRALIA/GALLERY.cfm?DisplayGal=1A, accessed 20 April 2016

Materials

Lineco PVA adhesive (901-1008) neutral pH.1 \$8.95 Reversible and dries clear
Micador Group Fixative Workable Mat 450 g \$12 clear, permanent protection <http://micador.com.au/Product/669/Micador-Fixative>