



STEELREID Studio

Pennie Steel

# 'CECI N'EST PAS UNE GALERIE'

## **A shared vision for a Blue Mountains heritage house**

Brian Reid and Pennie Steel both have long and interesting individual careers as artists, each over some forty-five years. Since 1999, they have collaborated on a range of work calling themselves SteelReid Studio with the latest incarnation of this fruitful partnership finding its home and inspiration in Katoomba.

It is here, at Cathkin Braes, a beautiful Federation Queen Anne style house on the corner of Lurline Street and Kurrawan Road, the two artists are currently developing a new kind of artspace: part theatre, part private art collection, part digital gallery, part educational hub and artistic forum, part ongoing artwork-in-itself. The venture is strictly non-commercial and not-for-profit and can even be playfully summarised, in the spirit of Magritte, as 'this is NOT a gallery'.

Oz Arts writer **Julian Leatherdale** visited Brian and Pennie to find out more about their exciting work-in-progress.

## **A meeting of artistic minds**

Born in Sydney, Brian grew up in New Zealand and in 1969 gained a Diploma of Fine Arts from Canterbury University, Christchurch. On graduation he held solo and group exhibitions throughout New Zealand before moving to Australia in 1976. Since then, he has exhibited in Melbourne, Adelaide, Sydney and Brisbane, Alice Springs, the Gold Coast and the Blue Mountains and travelled widely both here and in Europe.

With a longstanding interest in photography, Brian completed a Graduate Diploma in Professional Art Studies (Electromedia) in 1983 at the City Arts Institute (now COFA, UNSW). Apart from his career as a painter and graphic artist, Brian has worked on multimedia installations, projections and collaborative image projects in diverse venues including theatres, studios, restaurants and night clubs as well as photographing and filming performances, artworks and artists.

Since 1970 Brian has been a passionate art teacher at both tertiary and secondary levels as well as training secondary art teachers in the Faculty of Education at the University of Sydney. His primary interest now, as one half of the SteelReid collaboration, is creating digital images and DVDs.

Born in the United Kingdom, Pennie Steel gained an Art Diploma from Bournemouth College of Art. She started out designing window displays for retail businesses in Bournemouth and later London, and, after migrating to Australia in 1969, for stores such as Farmer's and Darrell Lea in Sydney. With a Bachelor of Education from Alexander Mackie CAE she taught art in high schools in Western Sydney and engaged in production and design for their musicals.

From 1981-84 she participated in group exhibitions in Sydney and Adelaide as well as solo and group shows following her graduation from the South Australian





Birgitte Hansen, *Gaia*, Newcastle (SteelReid Collection)

*A new chapter has now opened with the ongoing refurbishment of Cathkin Braes ... the latest incarnation of SteelReid Studio*

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College of Fine Art in 1985, garnering several SA art prizes. Pennie relocated to the Sunshine Coast where, between 1988 and 1996, she exhibited regularly at local galleries including Hyatt Regency, Coolumb; Blue Marble Gallery, Buderim; and Noosa Regional Gallery, winning a clutch of regional art show prizes. In 1998 Pennie held her graduation exhibition for her Master of Letters Visual Art and Design from the University of New England.

'I actually met Pennie in a flower shop in Red Hill in Brisbane,' says Brian. 'Everyone thought she was a florist but it was actually performance art. I talked to her and soon discovered she was an artist; she had a Master's degree, had been a teacher, an art consultant with the NSW Department of Education. When I saw what she does, I realised how brilliant it is.'

'Everything Pennie does might seem disparate but it is holistic; it all comes together when you can see the whole horizon. I realised that it wasn't a flower shop I was standing in, it was an artwork, a conceptual installation. Like trompe l'oeil, people really thought they were walking into a florist. They left with beautiful flowers which were in fact organic sculptures.'

1999 saw the establishment of SteelReid with a gallery in Brisbane and, over the next ten years, many public art commissions including Wearable Art Performances and sculptural installations for clients including Queensland Art Gallery, Opera Queensland, and the Department

of Premier and Cabinet. Public spaces for this work included theatres, coffee clubs, concert halls, botanic gardens, food and music festivals and showgrounds.

International collaborations have seen Pennie's work exhibited in the UK, France and the USA. While continuing her painting and drawing practice, Pennie has diversified into the creation of collages, dolls' houses, fashionable and fetish wearable art, botanic and organic sculptural works and, most recently, sculptures in paper and polystyrene, all part of a 'found object' aesthetic.

#### **Cathkin Braes: the house**

A new chapter has now opened with the ongoing refurbishment of Cathkin Braes, a splendid Federation Queen Anne style house in Katoomba, the latest incarnation of SteelReid Studio. This elegant hipped-roofed, gabled, red-brick house with sandstone block foundations (quarried from local stone at Winmalee) and deep verandahs has a charming character and colourful history of its own.

Cathkin Braes was built by John Howie, a renowned Scots builder and stone mason, born in Glasgow in 1850. The house is named after his wife Mary's birthplace in Scotland. John arrived in Australia with Mary and his sister and brother in June 1879 (their baby son died on the voyage); quarantined at North Head, he engraved a stone at Quarantine Bay to commemorate the journey.

Kaya Sulc, *The Burden* (detail)







Starting out as the Clerk of Works at the Colonial Architects Office under James Barnett, John set up in business with his brother Archie as Howie Brothers (later John Howie and Sons) and won major contracts for public works including a naval store on Garden Island, the GPO in Martin Place, additions to the Australian Museum, and the City vegetable markets.

Their reputation as builders and masons grew rapidly. In 1897 and 1899 they worked on two galleries for the Art Gallery of NSW and the central lobby completed in 1902. In 1906 Howie won the contract for the grand sandstone wing of the Mitchell Library which still holds in its collection a silver trowel and mallet awarded to the Howie Brothers for 'faithful work and straightforward dealing'.

Top: Cathkin Braes today  
Left: Howie family members

Opposite top:  
Merve Moriarty, *A Tree Grows in Our Garden*,  
Melbourne (SteelReid Collection)  
Below: Nora McGee and Pennie Steel with  
Warwick Fuller, *Sun Smoke Storm and Stubble*,  
Blue Mountains (SteelReid Collection)

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John Howie retired from the business in 1910 and his sons took over, working on notable projects such as the Bondi Pavilion and the now demolished Roseville Bridge. John moved to Katoomba in 1912 where he built Cathkin Braes for his wife and family. His hand-carved sandstone gateposts on the Lurline Street frontage of the property are regarded as highly significant from a heritage perspective for their pointed caps and trefoil motif. Each ceiling in the house is unique with plaster motifs of Australian subjects such as lyrebirds.

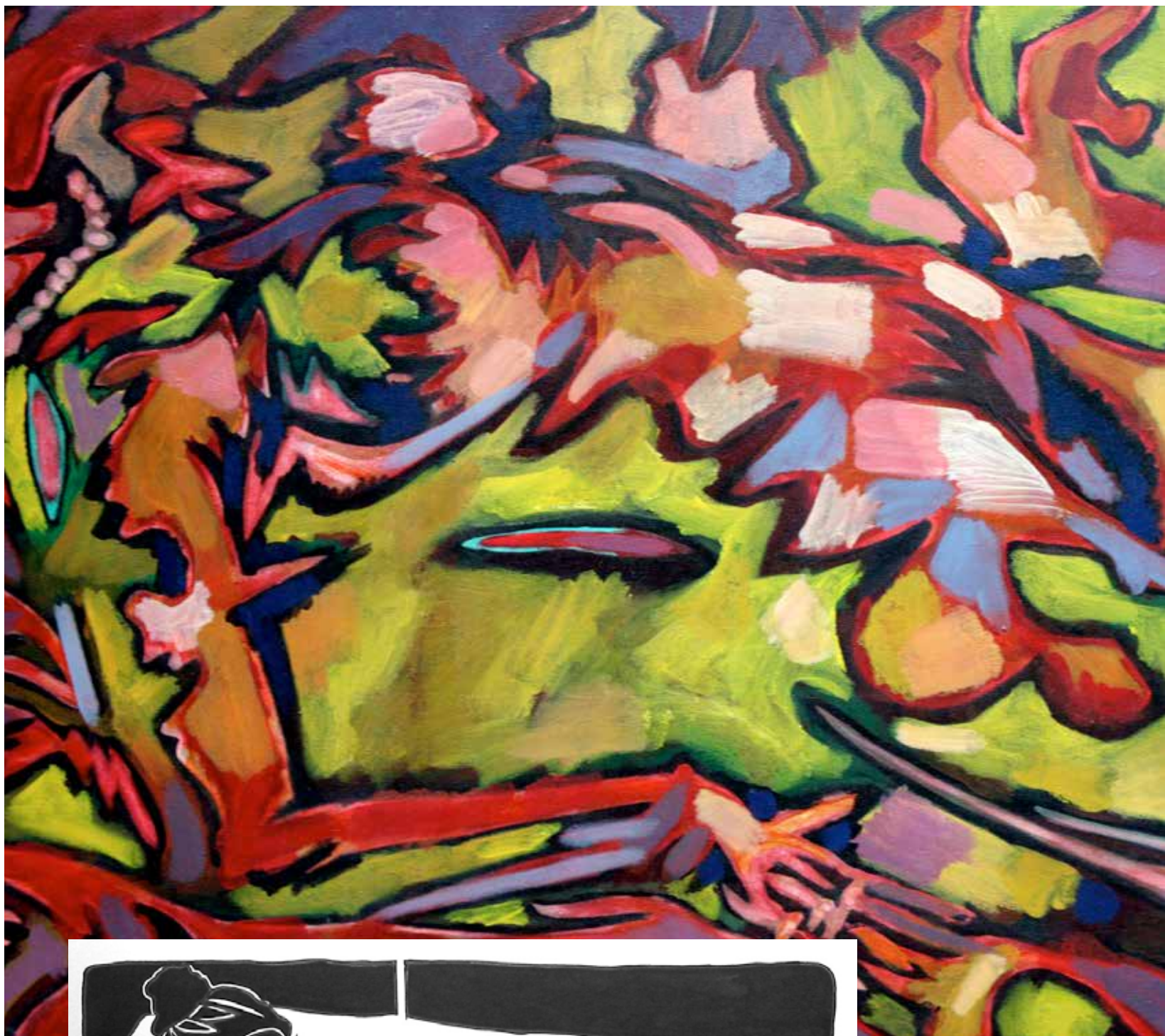
In 1913 John helped design the (now demolished) Congregational Church on Katoomba Street of which he was a member. In 1914 he became an alderman and then mayor, resigning twice in one year as he 'chafed under the regulations'. He built and paid for soldiers' homes in Darley Street, Katoomba in 1915 before his sudden death in 1917.

'Have you heard of him?' asks Brian. 'Nobody seems interested in his memory, his name or his heritage.' Brian and Pennie treasure the reputation of a man who was a talented artist in his own right but also had a major

impact in a public sphere, combining both the individual and the communal aspects of art-making that they embrace in their art philosophy. Great-great-grandsons John and Max Howie visited the house with their wives in September 2017 and exchanged photos and documents with Brian and Pennie.







BRIAN REID  
 This page:  
 Top: Greenwich, Sydney  
 Left: Ilam, Christchurch, NZ

Opposite:  
 Top: Cronulla, Sydney  
 Below: Hobson Street,  
 Auckland









Jane Canfield, *Pipers Flat, Blue Mountains* (SteelReid Collection)

Pennie's mother Jane lived in the house alone, fiercely independent, for some years before her death in 2016 at age 96. Jane painted – some of her works are in Brian and Pennie's private collection – and she encouraged her talented daughter's creative path. Throughout Pennie's long career, Jane always told her that 'you really need somewhere to show your art'. On Jane's death, Pennie inherited the house as well as a pool of money to help with her and Brian's development of an artistic vision.

#### **The past meets the future: a creative vision**

'Our options were to – God forbid – sell the house,' says Pennie, 'or create a really exciting, energised space where we could show and make our work and where artists could engage, argue and conduct the conversations that need to go on. We've also created a collection of other artists' work which we house here including well-known Blue Mountains artists and some from interstate. We have no intention of selling that collection - that is part of our whole ethos.'

Brian and Pennie have turned away from the market-driven, art-as-investment model of trading art practised by most commercial galleries. They have also embraced artistic creation as collaborative teamwork rather than the 'isolated, self-expression' of the lone, genius artist.

As Brian points out, there are historic precedents for this approach: artists from different disciplines (music, literature, visual arts) cross-fertilised their artistic visions by mixing in café society or identifying themselves with groups, movements and manifestos. Further back, of course, we have the 'teamwork' of the artisan guilds who built Gothic cathedrals.

While learning from the past, this spirit of collaboration and communal art-making is forward-looking. 'We're talking about creativity, imagination, fantasy and innovation. Which is the next step, not Lot's Wife looking backwards.' Brian and Pennie are both excited by the

possibilities they see in digital technology, particularly Google's Arts & Culture site that draws on international gallery collections.

The house is full of artworks and furnishings that they call 'installation art' and which they use as props and sets for staging performances by models and other artists, costumed in wearable art. In this theatrical setting of the SteelReid Studio, people are invited to play, invent, 'make it up'; the whole process is unscripted. 'Nobody teaches children how to use a sandpit; play is automatic,' says Brian.

It appears that as a visiting writer, sitting and talking to Brian and Pennie and recording their interview, I have already joined this cast of art-makers. 'Let's turn reality into art; this is our work,' says Brian. 'We reinvent ourselves every day,' observes Pennie.

Our interview is briefly interrupted by Owen Dwyer, the master heritage builder whose expertise is helping with the heritage-sensitive revitalisation of the house. Brian and Pennie are quick to tell me that Owen is also a gifted wood craftsman and show me one of his hand-carved bowls on a plinth in the hallway, part of their collection. The well-known Blue Mountains photographer Peter Adams is making plinths for the studio in his new role as woodworker and furniture-maker.

Brian and Pennie took up residence in the house in December 2017. Much of Jane's antique furniture remains and the restoration has been done with great attention to detail thanks to a heritage architect and engineers, and heritage plasterers, tilers and brickies. The gardens have been landscaped and planted with the expert guidance of a heritage gardener.

'We have been in touch with the Historic Houses Trust,' says Brian, 'and when we have completed our restoration, they want to bring bus loads of visitors

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Pennie Steel: *From Ideal States and Sacred Places Collection*

up from Sydney to see it.' The membership of the Art Gallery of NSW has also expressed an interest in seeing the collection and the house with tours by appointment.

#### Performance and image

Brian has kept visual documentation of every phase of the restoration just as he documents all aspects of Pennie's art practice: 'She is my major performance artist.' Brian and Pennie have arranged collaborative performance pieces around the world and over five decades. 'We see our moving through life as a journey like choreography,' says Brian, 'the way actors move on a stage.'

Pennie makes miniature sets and architectural models that she calls 'Ideal States and Sacred Places'. She still has her own childhood dolls' house. 'We move tiny figures around in these houses and take pictures to tell stories,' explains Brian. 'We're not taking on George Lucas. We want to keep these productions within the realm of visual arts, clearly making art as performance and installation work.'

Brian and Pennie even look at Cathkin Braes as 'a big dolls' house'. In the same way that Pop Art played with scale, making big things small and vice versa, Pennie makes sculpture of art galleries or artist studios. Brian has also photographed thousands of images of artist studios – 'their creative nests' – turning them into animated DVDs which he regards as artworks in their own right.

Brian and Pennie believe that whatever artists do is art – 'even Pennie's dreams are Hitchcockian artworks' – and the creative impulse is often evident from an early age. 'The problem is that with most people your wonderful fluid imagination as a child is suppressed by primary school and high school,' says Pennie. 'So you can no longer dig out this stuff which is so innocent, so clear and so simple. When we go to school it becomes complex and cerebral.' Brian and Pennie both pride







Pennie Steel, *The Pool*

*Brian and Pennie both admire that other highly-educated Blue Mountains iconoclast, Norman Lindsay, whose house at Springwood ... was a mecca for artists and poets from 1912.*

themselves on their long record of teaching, nurturing their students' creative imaginations.

#### **Long-term plans**

'This will be a trust after we're gone,' Brian explains. The project is completely self-funded with no support, recognition or subsidies from major art galleries or arts funding bodies. 'We are just doing this because we have the means. This is a lighthouse and we'll switch the light on and it will never go out.'

Brian and Pennie both admire that other highly-educated Blue Mountains iconoclast, Norman Lindsay, whose house at Springwood (built and sold to him by the entrepreneur Francis Foy) was a mecca for artists and poets from 1912. 'He's my hero,' says Brian, 'an Australian master. He was run out of town because the fundamentalists couldn't cope with the frivolity and 'evil' of his parties in George Street. If he'd lived anywhere else, he would be recognised as a great artist.' Unlike his friend and fellow-artist Rupert Bunny, Lindsay did not decamp to Paris to make his reputation, refusing to abandon Australia. 'The hard road – chosen by Lindsay – was to stay here and fight the rednecks.'

Affectionately regarding Lindsay as a spiritual forefather, Pennie and Brian have elected to stay in Katoomba rather than cash up and go to New York or travel the world enjoying art galleries and festivals. 'I came to Australia in '69, I've been here a long time,' says Pennie. 'I would like to see this project come to a point where I've contributed something to Australia: a sacred space.'

Brian and Pennie value the independence of having their own place to show their art as it avoids pressure or any agendas about what they can and cannot create.

In five years' time, Brian and Pennie envisage the studio fulfilling several other roles. As a media centre and



portal, artists will be able 'come out' and show the world their art through a digital gallery. Brian also makes art digitally which can be seen live on the internet. He sees the future of art displayed on all our screens (tablets, home theatre, laptop and PC monitors). Google's Arts & Culture project is already reproducing in high-resolution the art collections of the biggest art galleries in the world.

Down the track, Pennie and Brian hope that their studio may also run art history and theory workshops with possible links to Year 12 art students at Blue Mountains high schools.

#### The SteelReid collection

Brian and Pennie have started building a private art collection, half of which is from Blue Mountains artists such as John Wilson, Warwick Fuller, Jenni Trezise, Kate Soady, Lyn McDougall, Audrey Rhoda, Peter Adams, Birgitte Hansen (now living in Newcastle) and Sophie Conolly (who hails from Bournemouth like Pennie).

Other Australian artists include Stuart MacFarlane from Adelaide; Colin Passmore from the Sunshine Coast; Merv Moriarty who started the Flying Arts School; Prue Acton, the fashion designer; Julia Castiglione-Bradshaw from Hobart; and Kudditji Kngwarreye, younger brother of Emily, from the Utopia community in the Northern Territory. 'We have no intention of selling any of the works. We buy what we really like,' says Pennie. 'You could call it eclectic. And we are on the look out to acquire more.'

A tour of the house takes in two rooms of Pennie's works including her glass-domed architectural models hand-cut and constructed from cardboard and



Pennie Steel, *The Red Sari and the Apple*

polystyrene. Her paintings tackle themes of migration, pilgrimage, fabrics and myth with strong influences of Italian Renaissance and Medieval art.

A tall copper sculpture *The Burden* by Czech artist Kaya Sulc stands in the centre of one room. 'Kaya has left us all his paintings and sculptures to manage after he dies,' explains Brian. 'So we've been taking on management of art estates.'



In other rooms are hung the rest of the collection including Brian's paintings strongly influenced by patterns from Maori culture and smaller works based on ancient maps of the Mediterranean. Like Pennie, Brian likes to recycle materials and has painted these smaller works on shop awnings.

A front room, a light-filled parlour with the addition of a Queen Anne fireplace correct to the period, features Pennie's Japanese- and Chinese-influenced costuming. It is in these costumes, 'actors' (models, artists, collaborators) perform in different rooms of the house as choreographed 'dolls' – 'like spontaneous Dada theatre' – and are recorded in Brian's animated sequences of photographic images which in turn inspire individual paintings by Pennie.

#### **The house as artwork**

'This house has gone from John Howie to Jane, Pennie's mother, and now it is us – SteelReid, one word,' says Brian. 'The house is zoned residential so we cannot and will not open it to the public as a gallery. We call it

SteelReid Studio as that is private and you can visit here by appointment.'

The two artists conceive of the house as an artwork itself, a conceptual installation, and a theatre space for performance of any kind: dance, music, plays. 'You can't separate the building from what takes place inside.' Brian compares the house to Dr Who's Tardis containing a larger, theoretically limitless world of culture within its walls. 'For me now, exhibiting is the internet or cyberspace. We are now setting up a portal for us to leap into the wider world of art. And people may just visit us digitally.'

There have been plenty of visitors including the new GANG GANG gallery in Lithgow, and Geoff White from Lost Bear Gallery in Katoomba. 'There's a great deal of interest in what we are doing,' says Brian. 'In all the different pieces of the jigsaw puzzle.'

'Art is a game that you've got to play different ways,' observes Brian. Drawing on their long artistic careers

Pennie Steel, Medieval City





that embrace education, public art, conceptual installation, performance, photography and partnerships across many media and disciplines, Pennie and Brian are both consummate players of this 'game' as they create their multi-layered collaborative vision for SteelReid Studio.

Julian Leatherdale

Enquiries regarding visits  
and the collection  
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Jane Beers, Still Life with Striped Jug, Katoomba (SteelReid Collection)

JenniTrezise, Nude, Blue Mountains (SteelReid Collection)







Stuart McFarlane, *The Stopover*, Adelaide (SteelReid Collection)



Kudditji Kngwarreye, *Utopia* (SteelReid Collection)