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Published in conjunction with the exhibition
J.W. Power: Abstraction—Creation, Paris 1934
University Art Gallery, The University of Sydney
24 September 2012 – 26 January 2013, and
Heide Museum of Modern Art, Melbourne, 2014

Exhibition curators and editors: A.D.S. Donaldson and Ann Stephen
Managing editor: Luke Parker
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Graphic design and print production: Peter Thom
Printed in Australia using Forestry Stewardship Council
approved paper
Published by Power Publications in conjunction with the
University Art Gallery, The University of Sydney

Endpapers based on the cover of J.W. Power’s Éléments de la Construction Picturale 1932.
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Introduction

PROFESSOR MARK LEDBURY
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It is always an enormous pleasure to be part of a project that casts an artist in an entirely new and unexpected light, and that pleasure is doubled when the artist happens to also be inextricably and powerfully entwined with the history of the University of Sydney. That is the happy circumstance of this exhibition and publication, both a fundamental re-evaluation of the work of an important Australian artist, and the key marker of the 50th anniversary of the announcement of the Power Bequest to the University of Sydney – a foundational act of generosity which created, ultimately, both the Department of Art History at the University and the Museum of Contemporary Art, one of the premier institutions of contemporary art in Australia.

In part, the generosity of Power the benefactor and creator of a vital and continuing legacy to the visual arts in Sydney and Australia obscured his own importance as an artist and contributor to important European aesthetic and political debates in the turbulent decades between the wars. This book seeks to give Power, the artist, back the place in the spotlight that he enjoyed as a key player in Abstraction-Création and as an artist in constant touch with the restless waves of artistic creation in the interwar years. As Ann Stephen and A.D.S. Donaldson’s essay demonstrates, Power was an artist of great earnestness and seriousness of purpose. Constantly engaged with and responsive to the ferment of often competing visions of what mattered aesthetically, he was able to respond to Klee’s abstraction, cubo-futurist dynamism, the poetry of Eluard, the engaged, cubist-derived language of Léger, among other tendencies, and sensitive to the stakes of the struggle with plastic form. At the same time, though, as Stephen and Donaldson show, he is an artist of great humour and vitality, whose

marvellous heads are playful and sometimes even parodic, whose iconography and formal language is suspicious of a po-faced cubism that could not speak to and of the human.

The work of historical reconstruction that underpins the exhibition is also a work of reconstruction and reframing of a reputation – a coherent and persuasive plea for J.W. Power’s place in Australian art. Power is, this exhibition and book proclaim, one of the most important post-cubist Australian artists and among the central figures of early twentieth century Australian art.

In order to make this case, of course, we need to see Power’s work first and foremost, and the exhibition takes as its organising principle an unprecedented recreation of the viewing experience that was presented to those who saw his show in 1934. This book extends that recreation by making available for the first time in English the fundamental research of Gladys Fabre, the pre-eminent historian of Abstraction-Création. It also includes an essay of elegant lucidity on Apollo and Daphne by Virginia Spate which proves that J.W. Power’s work not only can bear such detailed scrutiny but deserves it.

This book is also evidence of our continuing commitment, as inheritors of Power’s generous benefaction, to his mission to bring new research and ideas in the visual arts to the people of Australia – a mission to which I remain firmly committed and which is at the heart of everything we do at the Power Institute. The exhibition is a unique moment to both celebrate the man and fulfill the mission.