

Opening 20 March, 2020

Bessie Davidson & Sally Smart – *Two artists and the Parisian avant- garde*

Bessie Davidson was one of a cohort of female South Australian artists who, at the turn of the nineteenth century, sought to expand their lives and artistic careers by travelling to the renowned cultural centres of Europe, most notably Paris and London. Many artists returned to Australia bringing their matured artistic style to an Australian audience. Davidson was one of the few who chose to remain in Europe, firmly establishing herself within the vibrant artistic milieu of Paris's Montparnasse. Over the course of her career, Davidson received many accolades and awards including being made a chevalier of the Legion of Honour – the highest award conferred by the French government.

Whilst Davidson's work has been largely overlooked in Australia, stories of Bessie Davidson's life as an artist living in Paris were a frequent part of conversations in artist **Sally Smart's** childhood home in rural South Australia. Bessie was Sally's great aunt – her legacy empowered this renowned Australian artist to follow her own artistic ambitions.

In this new exhibition curated by **Tansy Curtain, Bendigo Art Gallery** brings together more 50 works that highlight Davidson's 'modern French impressionist' style of painting – with light filled domestic interiors, landscapes and women at leisure. In addition, the gallery has invited Sally Smart to create a new body of work responding to and developing upon the cultural legacy of Davidson as a pioneering female South Australian artist – firmly placing the work of this ground-breaking artist back into the story of Australian art history.

Smart, who recently retraced Davidson's life in Paris, has worked with leading dancers Deanne Butterworth and Jo Lloyd to create a new a cross-disciplinary video installation that represents Davidson's relationship with lifelong friend, and rumoured lover, Margaret Preston. This newly commissioned work "embodies the timeless psychological tensions for these women, grappling with

the avant-garde in art and life, at a traumatic period in human history – with war, isolation, gender, and modernity,” and will be shown alongside a survey of key works from Smart’s Australian and international collections.

Bessie Davidson (born 1879) to Scottish immigrants David and Ellen Davidson. While not much is known of her early education, she studied in the private atelier of Rose McPherson (later known as Margaret Preston), and with privately with French-born Berthe Mouchette, and at the National Gallery School in Melbourne. With Preston, she moved to Europe in 1904, studying at the Academie de la Grande Chaumiere in Montparnasse, returning to Adelaide to much acclaim, where they established their own atelier and held a joint exhibition in 1907. Davidson returned to Paris in 1910, and apart from brief visits home to Adelaide, remained there until her death in 1965.

Sally Smart (born 1960) is an Australian contemporary artist known for her large-scale [assemblage installations](#) that incorporate a range of media, including felt cut-outs, painted canvas, drawings, screen-printing, printed fabric and photography, [performance](#) and [video](#). Her art addresses gender and identity politics and questions the relationships between body and culture, including trans-national ideas that shaped cultural history. She has exhibited widely throughout Australia and internationally, and her works are held in major galleries in Australia and around the world.

Exhibition dates: 20 March – 21 June 2020

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