of Nolan’s provincialism: ‘This need for solution, the optimistic belief that man can understand and master the confusion of life, is surely at variance with our 20th century despair of finding a cohesive pattern.’ He asked why all the faces in Nolan’s paintings based on Shakespeare’s Sonnets were so ‘enigmatically, unpredictably Australian.’ Agreeing that his Shakespeare ‘looked like a swagman,’ Nolan wondered whether it wasn’t part of the ungovernable egoism of creativity that Shakespeare, indeed the world, would be seen in terms of one’s own experience? — ‘In saying something powerful about yourself poetically, you become reconciled to it.’ To Spencer, Nolan’s ‘outsidedness is really the equation of his Australianness.’ To Nolan, on the other hand, ‘outsidedness’ was a condition of creativity.”

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Arthur Boyd, the second creative fellow represented in this exhibition, spent the five months of his fellowship (21 September 1971 – 29 February 1972) in Canberra. His home base since 1959 had been London, where Australian artists and writers had been having the effect of an ‘antipodean’ new wave. Their art was raw and uncompromising, and it expressed Australian realities that were exotic to international audiences yet touched on universal human myths.

When Boyd was approached by the Australian National University in early May 1970 he was fifty. Events during the past two or three years had put him in the position of considering the tenor of his art and life. In 1967 a first monograph, written by Franz Philipp, had pointed to the meaningful recurrence of motifs and stories in his work. The following year, returning to Australia on a visit, Boyd recovered his dead father’s drawings (seeing in them much that resembled his own work) and travelled around the painting sites of his father, his grandfather, and his own early career. The university’s letter of invitation arrived at the end of a major retrospective at the National Gallery of Victoria. This phase of Boyd’s self-reflection was to have a formidable outcome in the series of paintings that followed his creative fellowship in Canberra.

The paintings produced during 1972-73 were dubbed the ‘Caged Painter’ series by Ursula Hoff in her 1986 monograph on the artist; the name stuck, and was formalised by Janet McKenzie in a monograph published in 2000. Tom Rosenthal, an English publisher friend, has said
that the series was Boyd’s ‘way of talking out’. About what? Apparently about creativity itself. In Rosenthal’s view any individual of such prodigious talent, having created the prosperous material circumstances by which many others lived and on which they relied would be burdened by a sense of responsibility – and Boyd was a man seemingly bound by an unusual personal humility, who would blame himself for the ills of the world, yet feel powerful emotions of anger and torment. Rosenthal said, Boyd ‘mocks his friends and himself.’ And Boyd said, ‘I put myself in the cage … instead of talking, I had my paint brushes’.

Boyd, like Nolan, had a plan for how he would spend the time of his fellowship: ‘His attitude is that what he is good at is painting, not talking, so paint he will.’ In August, before embarking by ship, he forwarded painting materials: five boxes containing paint, brushes, palette knives and other equipment and one box of photographs of his drawings. In addition, he sent out a container-load of works of art: 91 paintings, 33 ceramic paintings, numerous drawings, and five tapestries — more than sufficient for a second major retrospective (this one selected by Boyd himself). For the first month of the fellowship, while preparations were underway for the exhibition — to open on 21 October — Boyd hung around in the Childers Street studio that had been assigned to him by the university, ‘working on illustrations for a book of poems by Peter Porter, and a book of Nebuchadnezzar paintings,’ and unpacking crates. The contents, as they were hung on the studio walls and propped against boxes, were so many mementos of his personal history. As well, he had the box of photographs of his drawings to reflect upon. It seems clear that Boyd had gathered together for Canberra the memories and objects that would help him to address the eternal questions: where am I?, where have I been?, where am I going?

‘ …the walls of the former efficient reading lab were lined with paintings representing virtually every phase of his painting life over the past 30 years. There were muted landscapes done when he was only 16, nightmarish paintings of the war years, paintings in which he had reworked Biblical themes made familiar by the old masters, portraits of family and friends, landscapes of the 1950s, work done in London in the years since he settled there in 1959, and canvases from his recent series based on the story of Nebuchadnezzar. Although his paintings range widely in subject, style and size, it is possible to trace reworkings of earlier ideas, the recurrence of certain motifs, the extraordinary colour sense culminating in the splendour of the Nebuchadnezzar series, and the
haunting sense of fear that pervades many of his paintings, relieved occasionally by a sly sense of fun."

Rosalie Gascoigne, viewing the exhibition, saw the way in which it was a personal review:

'I spent quite a lot of time there & was amazed at how much I got out of the show … I feel Boyd has travelled such a long journey to reach the point he is at now, that it is hard for the uninitiated to comprehend him. Like air travel. The soul follows on foot.'

Boyd did not intend to spend his time in Canberra working indoors in a reflective mode. Five minutes from the university apartment at 30 Hopegood Place, Garran took him into the country where a remarkably blue sky rose endlessly above white-grey pastureland on which shadows were etched in black. Yvonne Boyd has explained that Arthur hoped, in Canberra, to paint his own outdoor versions of Manet's famous 'Lunch on the Grass' that showed men in contemporary dress picnicking with naked women. Driving to Canberra, the Boyds stopped for a picnic lunch and Yvonne posed nude, sitting on a bank, for a tiny canvas 8 x 10 inches. A number of *plein-air* paintings the same small size were produced during the fellowship. As well:

'Arthur must have painted several large canvases of around 3 x 4 feet in the Canberra landscape. They were the first of the blond landscapes with blue skies. He liked the way the ground was lighter than the brilliant sky. There was some wonderfully clear weather. The summer sun was fierce, and we were told the winter could be as shrill as in northern Germany. The days when I posed nude for Arthur were the blue days. I'd boil the billy (Arthur included the billy in some of the 'lunch on the grass' paintings and a number of the Caged Painter canvases [Plates 11,14]). I didn't enjoy posing at all, a matter of privacy, but it didn't matter when Arthur and I were together. Our young daughter Lucy came with us occasionally and my posing didn't bother her at all, if she even noticed. Mostly it was just me and Arthur on those occasions though I remember once, when Lucy Beck (Arthur's eldest sister) was staying with us, we boiled the billy by a creek, there was a cloudburst, it rained abundantly, the creek rose and we had to scuttle, collect our things and flee. Arthur and I returned another day to hunt for some brushes that had washed away.'

Boyd responded to the crystalline light. Painting outdoors brought to his mind a comparison with the French Impressionists — the Australian light gave a sharp focus whereas the Impressionists with their 'fuzzy' atmosphere had responded to the vapidous air of Europe.
Not all of the outdoor paintings were set in the crisp daylight. A number of elegiac landscapes, such as *Dam near Canberra, evening* [Cat. no. 24] pictured the withdrawal of the light at dusk, when the skies remain clear while the landforms accumulate a weight of shadow. Two tiny, dark canvases given to university friends were painted within a couple of months of arriving. Though painted in the open air their theme was of death and regeneration: an aspect of the Old Testament story of Nebuchadnezzar with which Boyd had “travelled a long way” in recent years. In one, Nebuchadnezzar floats at the edge of the sea, a pale blue-grey tree or bouquet growing from his stomach into the lavender sky. In the other, Nebuchadnezzar is on all fours in the spent light, his back pushing up the earth and plants of a Canberra landscape. Their subject of death, physical decay and rebirth, above all their darkening light, recalled for Yvonne the circumstances in which the works were painted after 16 October 1971:

‘The Herbsts took us to Bob and Rosemary Brissenden’s beach cottage on the coast. Bob was not there when we arrived and Rosemary and the children came out to greet us. We settled in, Arthur did some painting, Rosemary and I talked. Then Bob Brissenden came in from Sydney, bringing the news for Arthur that his cousin Robin had died that day. Robin was just one year older than Arthur; his first commission as an architect had been to design Arthur’s first studio; they were close, and Robin’s death came as a great blow.”

She saw a connection between the dark palette of these paintings and an earlier time, ‘after his mother Doris died [1960], when Arthur painted huge dark canvases of falling figures. Sad paintings.’

In London, seven months after the fellowship ended, Boyd told a reporter that Canberra had “unsettled” him. He had now to work out what the experience meant, as he painted towards an exhibition:

‘[It was] to consist of about 40 paintings influenced by Boyd's last visit to Australia: a six-months fellowship to the Australian National University. … “I got a lot out of it, and it has been rather unsettling. You become attached or worn into a groove. You don't mean to break out, but when you do it can be unsettling to an advantage or it can have a bad effect. In this case I hope it has been a great advantage.”’

‘Victoria [where he lived until 1959] had been his main inspiration until the last visit. Then he and his wife moved into a university house in the
Canberra suburb of Garran. “I could walk into the country in five minutes. It was quite marvellous: there was this undulating, rolling quality. And the weather – the blueness of the sky: I still can’t get the blue skies right. Oh, that’s really a joke, but the blue is so intense compared to the Victorian.”

Self-deprecating though he was, Boyd conveyed his feeling of being poised for a breakthrough in his art. “You don’t mean to break out, but when you do it can be … an advantage or it can have a bad effect. In this case I hope it has been a great advantage.” With typical cautiousness he qualified, ‘You can delude yourself into thinking the next thing … will be better.’

His feeling of having jumped a groove in Canberra was justified. A new idea had been born there that redefined his art. Through 1972 into 1973 as Boyd painted for the May-June 1973 exhibition at Fischer Fine Art the initial subject of the nude female figure picnicking in the distinctive blue, white and black Canberra landscape gave way to the theme of the frustrated artist, in the same landscape. Hence this analysis begins with the landscape. Surveying the Canberra-based works twenty years later Boyd saw that although, of course, ‘more a Canberra country’, there was also a ‘connection with the dry, sandy part of northern Victoria and a sort of Grampians country,’ and concluded that the scene was ‘fairly generalised … not specific’.

National Gallery of Australia curators Deborah Hart and Elena Taylor gave me insights into how the landscape operates in the Caged Painter series, Elena remarking that it is a stage on which the artist has put himself, and Deborah suggesting that the ‘excoriating’ light of the landscape-cum-stage is the artist’s sign for the stripping away of layers of the creative persona. Responding as well to Tim Fisher’s apocalyptic interpretation of the series for the 1999 touring exhibition *Arthur Boyd and the Exile of Imagination*, I have leaned towards a generalised interpretation: the dramas performed in the clear light of an open stage are about creativity itself.

The paintings confront viewers with an extremity of expressiveness. They are powerfully, even violently, worked. The attack of brushstrokes on canvas is matched by the explosive energy of some of the figures. By contrast, other figures are impotent, passive, pursued and possessed. Emotions of fear, guilt, lust, greed, intellectual pride, impotence and frustration come across. A painter appears in most images, caged, chained, cross-dressing, animalistic, in the guise of Rembrandt, pierced like Christ, sexually ravished. In two paintings, he is suspended over a
boiling billy (a pot-boiler), one hand holding his brushes upside down against the canvas, the other hand reaching forward to rake in a pile of money. In some of these equivocal images money doubles as faeces: a fertiliser. A ram mounts a dog. A muzzled dog mounts a painter-bride [Plate 11]. One image is of a Woman injecting a rabbit [Plate 6]: ‘she is in this wire-mesh hospital and she’s naked, and on her back is a painter, as a ram, dressed up and holding the brushes’. A second rabbit image, Interior with black rabbit [Plate 7] has a dwarf painter wearing a ruff — a Don Quixote-cum-Rembrandt — whose brushes are raised like a lance as if jousting with the room’s other occupant, a huge black rabbit, but on closer examination the brushes are seen to impale the hand of the painter who is ‘hypnotised with fear’ and clings for dear life to the legs of his model as she crawls out of the picture.20 The dark interior of this hospital-cum-studio is located, suggestively, by the hot white landscape glimpsed through its wire-mesh window. A huge canvas Paintings in the studio: ‘Figure supporting back legs’ and ‘Interior with black rabbit’ [Plate 14] encapsulates the two rabbit paintings plus a third, Figure supporting back legs. In it, the “wire-mesh hospital” doubles as a dark studio, lit from outside by the exposing light and inside by the white-hot coupling of the painter and his muse. The latter’s straining legs extend beyond the ‘picture within a picture’ into the space of the studio itself. In the words of the inimitable Ursula Hoff:

‘Against the grey wall of a dimly lit interior leans a canvas on which a painter is propelled along by a woman, much like the woman with the lame dog in a drawing of the forties. The painter is half beast, half man; his face reminds us of the young farouche Rembrandt. Antlers grow from his head, his legs are formless and end in claws; like Actaeon he is changing into a beast. He holds brushes in one hand and gold in the other. A fury-like muse supports, pushes and ravishes him.”

The concept of creativity that recurs through the series is twofold. Creativity is the endless relay of picture within picture and creativity is demonic force. The theme was both personal to Boyd and universal in its concept of the creative drive as both imprisonment within art and possession from outside the self. The image of rape had an unlikely inception decades earlier in some wartime drawings of a kindly woman taking her partly paralysed dog for a walk, holding the dog’s back legs under her arms or over her shoulders and wheeling him before her. Almost all the motifs in the caged painter series had a life within Boyd’s past work. In a series of mutations flowers are feathers, are brushes laden
with colour, and spring like arrows from the head. The cave is hole is a crown. A windmill is a dragonfly is a bride. The ram is part ox (ram–ox is Franz Philipp’s term). Likewise the heavy boot, the bent–over tree, the lovers (dubbed ‘victims’ by Boyd), the figure outstretched on the ground, the watching figure, the dog, had descended in Boyd’s art through numerous incarnations. Boyd put down the roots of his equivocal imagery in the early 1940s, at a time when art historians were discoursing on the meaningful drift of motifs down long periods of time. As Daniel Thomas once said, ‘Boyd’s highly personal content becomes more extraordinary the more one ponders it. Surely he must be, for all his stylistic homage to other artists, one of the most original and inventive artists in the world?’

Boyd sought primal images, and did so two ways, tunnelling into his past and exploring the theme of the creative drive. In the Caged Painter series there is no resolution to the play of forces. Yet the blazing light, the openness of the landscape and Boyd’s stance of unreserve attest to an effort to achieve the utmost exposure and disclosure. The paintings’ disturbing effect is the turbidity of a violent story repeated over and over seemingly without cause or resolution. Creativity is presented as reasonless possession, inhospitable, graceless and rude. The imagery revolves around a conundrum. If you try to delve into the iconography to establish a first, foundational meaning, the picture within a picture merely repeats itself, as impossible to fathom as the origin of origins. In the composite imagery, the roles of victim and aggressor, animal and human, are mixed, not fixed. Frustration is not merely the passivity of a painter without his muse; it is integral to the pouncing, confrontational graphics dredged from the past, that do not resolve into a meaning or moral stance. The reason why the various attempts to explain the Caged Painter series have stayed with anecdote, iconography, and description is because the images are resolutely affective — ‘Instead of talking, I had my paint brushes.’

- The *Kneeling figure with canvas and black can* [Plate 11] is on a stark white ground against a blue sky. A muzzled dog flows over the man’s back. In its dark tone and adhesiveness the dog is like one of Boyd’s shearsers, pinning down the white bride — indeed, this painter is dressed as a bride. The colours are beautiful in the details, with delicately-nuanced pale blue, pink-brown, orange-brown and beige touches.
Behind the Figure with red dog [Plate 13] a eucalyptus sapling leans backwards and drops its bark as if straining to support the triangular framework that encloses the red dog and woman. The dog is of the same economical shape as the watching dog in Piero di Cosimo’s hyperreal Death of Procris (National Gallery, London). The base of the triangle is a full-bellied woman lying on the ground and pillowing her head in her arms, the classic pose for a nude. Her head is lifted to watch her pregnant belly and the dog, too, seems to watch her pregnancy. The naked woman blends into the white grassland, which has been brushed in slow surges tinted with grey, blue, pink, a khaki yellow–green, and the fringe of trees outlining the hill is topped by the limitless blue sky.

The Figure resting [Plate 12] is lapped by a quilt of blanched landscape delicately patterned with sparse vegetation. Near this man-in-uniform is another man who swims or crawls in the earth. In one hand the second man holds a bunch of violet-coloured flowers: death giving birth to life? Half man and half earth, the two men are versions of the same concept. The soldier is under a triangular shelter: his hand cups his cap in a gentle salute, and a bunch of paintbrushes beside him is equivalent to the flowers growing from the hand of the man swimming in the earth. Several things about this painting make me think of Manet. The exquisite bunch of violets, the pallor, the abbreviated modelling and sudden transitions from white to charcoal black. Above all, the theme of mortality tied to flowering is like the nature morte subjects Manet painted in his sickness.

Daphne and windpump [Cat. no. 21] is a pretty picture whose title (exceptional for the series) promises the safe delivery of a classical story. I first saw the painting with others in the series in 1977 when my attempt to resolve a meaning for it foundered in confusion. I wrote, ‘Like Primavera and Zephyr a springtime man rushes in from the right scattering flowers and foliage prettily on the white ground. Clutched in his hand—which is stretched out as far as the centre of the canvas—are some paint brushes (so he is an artist); he is proffering them like a bunch of flowers to a nude figure who cowers at furthest possible remove on the other side of the canvas. The pursued one is on her knees in an attitude of fear, crouching forward self-protectively and looking back over her shoulder—an awkward, eloquent pose reminiscent of those figures prostrated in the margins of Carolingian
manuscripts. I see now that I may have inverted the story because the full-cheeked Zephyr bursting into the picture from the right has a woman's breasts; moreover the embowering foliage is associated with Daphne, and with Primavera; in other words, with women. Now that I look again, the small cowering figure with one hand raised in protest and pleading could be a man. The pose of this terrified little figure echoes that of a tiny painter midfield who is crouched anxiously over a canvas on the ground. Zephyr-Daphne-Primavera is huge in the picture and a windmill with clanking sails on the left is almost as large: both of them exert wind and forcefulness. The windmill is one of Boyd's composites, part dragonfly, part bride, and reminiscent of the skeletal bi-plane in the Bert Hinkler works. In this picture it brings a small amount of water into a parched land. Spring's difficult re-birth? An oblique reference to T.S. Eliot's 'The Wasteland?' I can see how creativity – the paint brushes and the anxious painter – might tie in with ideas of water and spring sunshine stimulating the birth and leafing of plants. Daphne was pursued by the sun – Phoebus Apollo? None of these thoughts can be substantiated because the representation keeps mutating, just so many nudges to a wondering mind."

One of the key themes, the woman injecting the rabbit, stemmed from a visit Arthur and Yvonne made to a laboratory at Maudsley Hospital in London, possibly in 1969. 'I went to see this chap, a research scientist who sticks electrodes into rabbits' brains and he finds the pleasure zone of the brain, and every time the rabbit presses the electrode it gets a surge of pleasure, so the more it presses the more shocks it gets and eventually it just goes batty.' The first time they went, there was a cat on the table, opened-up but conscious. It had to be conscious for the experiment, which they were told it would not survive. After watching for a while 'Yvonne had to leave; she couldn't take any more.' Boyd's analogy seems to be art's capacity to produce pleasure by means that may be as synthetic, experimental and outside conventional niceness as scientific experimentation using animals.

The tenor of Boyd's narrative images before 1971 had been humanist re-imaginings from Biblical and other stories and great works of art. Viewers could have recourse to the well-known sources when wondering about meanings. In Canberra in 1971, Boyd was reported as saying that all art was 'essentially illustrative in nature. In his case, the illustration is often of a literary subject, be it his own poetry, Biblical stories or a Hebrew
legend, but it is so personal in expression and has such a range and depth of implication, that one could never preface the word 'illustration' with the pejorative 'mere'.

"Illustration" would not remotely describe the series of paintings that followed Canberra. I have suggested that the train of events that led Boyd, in 1972, to take as his subject the creative drive itself went back some years. I do not, myself, see the theme simply in terms of self-disclosure. Boyd's friend Tom Rosenthal thought that the artist was inclined to take the world's guilt upon himself. David Chalker told me Boyd used the term 'mercantile'. One aspect of the Caged Painter images is the role the market plays in creativity.

'He had feelings of guilt about making money. His father, whose work he admired, had not made money. At first, Boyd had been the same; then the money started rolling in and with it, a feeling of guilt. He tried to square accounts by giving away his possessions.'

Yet Boyd did not despise the market. In his imagery money is a fertiliser. If we interpret the theme as reflecting Boyd's career, he had found that his most marketable art was the Wimmera landscapes which would sell and sell, and had an audience and an appeal that transcended his more creative output. He deferred to this taste, as he deferred to all the judgments and interpretations of his art. His attitude of accepting (instead of judging) the conditions given to him, laid Boyd open to the charge that he succumbed to market forces — though he could not be accused of sinking his creativity into the marketable strand of his production.

Some of the imagery seems to allude to acrimonious criticism made by Australian artists of the 1960s generation who accused their seniors Drysdale, Nolan and Boyd of hogging the limelight with their repetitive story paintings and throwing a shadow over the younger "abstract" artists. Boyd referred to the wider historical context in which that accusation was made: the supposed death of painting in the West. By the later 1960s it was widely held in Western art circles that the reductive tendency in modernism had led painting to a dead end. Hence Boyd's artist is caged and impotent. He paints a tree (brushing the tree itself) [Cat. no. 17] and a shadow [Plates 8,10] (the shadow serving — briefly — as the painted image). Meanwhile, his model leaves the scene [Plate 8], bringing about the end of the subject. As he said, the paintings "are about coming to a dead end, or thinking you've come to a dead end, and then making use of the fact to rekindle the batteries."
There was yet another aspect to how creativity was debated at the time, which certainly bothered Nolan and possibly played a part in how Boyd conceived these paintings. He alluded to it when he summed up: ‘The whole series of them is about a painter painting in the landscape, and exclusively an Australian landscape.’ Expatriate Australians of Boyd’s generation had to cope with the nationalist idea that they owed their international success to Australia. Their reaction to this favourite theme of journalism was the same as creative women and indigenous artists have when their success is credited to their gender or race. If creativity is to be evaluated by factors outside the field of creativity, its very basis is called into question. In the columns of some 1960s newspapers the terms of the creative fellowships acquired a flavour of bringing them home, as if the university, with antipodean condescension, were repatriating Australia’s prodigal sons so that they could renew their creativity. Nolan reacted strenuously against this concept, spending most of the period of his fellowship in neighbouring countries, and explaining that Australia would be most clearly seen in the image refracted by its northern neighbours. The idea that the painter was merely a tool for the creative expression of nation, race or gender did not please Boyd either. In 1965, when asked by Hal Missingham, ‘what do you want for your art?,’ he had finally replied that he would like to be free of the “Australian” (national) and “Expressionist” (art movement) labels. He did not deny personal responsibility; what he produced was ‘mine, if I can make it that way’, ‘but … I’d like it to be a much more universal sort of thing’ and ‘much less typed … just … good painting rather than … something that comes from somewhere.’

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Narritjin Maymuru’s fellowship followed seven years later, in August 1978. Nearly seven years had intervened between Nolan’s fellowship and Boyd’s. The interval was sufficient for changes to take place that affected the way the three artists thought about their work. The trajectory of Boyd’s and Nolan’s careers followed a path between Australia and the art centres of the West. In 1965 Nolan bore the brunt of a backlash by young artists against the achievements of the postwar expatriates. Boyd, in 1972-73, addressed the issues that appeared to threaten the creativity of the