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VOGUE ARTS

Works by Margaret Preston, clockwise: *Western Australian Gum Blossom* (1928); *Implement Blue* (1927); *Aboriginal Flowers* (1928).

Modern love

Three independent artists who pioneered Modernism are being celebrated in a new exhibition, writes *Sophie Tedmanson*.

"All form – landscape, interiors, still life, flowers, animals, people – has an inarticulate grace and beauty: painting to me is expressing this form in colour, colour vibrant with light, but containing this other, silent quality which is unconscious, and belongs to all things created."

– Grace Cossington Smith (1892–1984).

Georgia O'Keeffe, Margaret Preston and Grace Cossington Smith were an ocean apart, but united by their role as early 20th century pioneers of Modernism. The three artists have been brought together for the first time in *O'Keeffe, Preston, Cossington Smith: Making Modernism*, an exhibition visiting Melbourne's Heide Museum of Modern Art, the Queensland Art Gallery (QAG), then the Art Gallery of New South Wales (AGNSW).

"While these artists aren't bound by any personal familiarity or even stylistic similarities in their work, they were joined by the fact that they rejected what they perceived as the tired traditions of the past," says Denise Mimmocchi, AGNSW curator. "So while they each were looking at ways they could be modern artists they also – surprisingly, given they were working on

opposite sides to the globe – shared resources in what they used to make their art modern: they were reading the same books, looking to the same artists, but they absorbed these influences and created them as something that was distinctly their own.

"They were also joined by the fact that they were looking at revitalising the still life and landscape genres to invoke a sense of a modern experience of nature and the landscape."

"Australia is a fine place in which to think; you do not get bothered with foolish new ideas. Tradition thinks for you, but Heavens! How dull! To keep myself from pouring out the self-same pictures every year I started to think things out."

– Margaret Preston (1875–1963).

It was a still life that brought the two Australians together in 1952, when Preston awarded Cossington Smith the Mosman Art Prize for painting, for *Gum Blossom and Drapery* (1952). "There was a convergence of interests ... Preston painted gum blossoms herself and was interested in native flowers as part of her agenda to create a national art," says Heide curator Lesley Harding.

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By Grace Cossington Smith, **clockwise from top left:** *The Window* (1956); *Gum Blossom and Drapery* (1952); *Landscape at Pentecost* (1929).

By Georgia O'Keeffe, **clockwise:** *Purple Hills, Ghost Ranch 2* (1934); *Pelvis IV* (1944); *Blue Line* (1919); *Petunia No. 2* (1924).

COURTESY OF THE GALLERIES AND ARTISTS' ESTATES

Cossington Smith lived in Turramurra, on Sydney's leafy north shore, which forms the backdrop to many of her works. Her niece Ann Mills, now custodian of Cossington Smith's estate, lives in her former home. Seeing the house, a heritage-listed former Quakers' meeting hall, you are immediately transported into one of Cossington Smith's paintings. Mills' bedroom is faintly reminiscent of the time her aunt immortalised it in *Interior with Blue Painting* (1956), and *Interior with Wardrobe Mirror* (1955). For Mills, the artist was "just Aunt Grace". "We knew she painted, but it wasn't a big deal," says Mills, who is the subject of several Cossington Smith portraits. "It was just one of those things that she did; we'd be sitting by the fire and she would sketch you. We didn't take much notice."

Cossington Smith never married and was quite reclusive, quietly working on her paintings in her then semi-rural home. "That didn't hinder her from pursuing what she wanted to do, which was to do with colour and light," says Harding. "In fact, by the time she gets to those beautiful window paintings later in her career, she's just somewhere on her own. There was no-one quite like her in Australian art."

This was in contrast to Preston, whose travels were "absolutely incredible", says Harding. "She was amazingly worldly." Harding adds that while Preston trained in Europe, she was inspired by Australia's landscape. "Preston was a vocal advocate, in terms of [Australian culture]. She thought art began from the home and everybody, especially women, could make art at home. She more than wanted to paint pictures of Australian life; she wanted to

improve Australia. O'Keeffe does that [too] but not out of a sense of 'I'm going to do something really good for America.'"

"I decided that if I could paint that flower in a huge scale, you could not ignore its beauty."

– Georgia O'Keeffe (1887–1986).

Across the Pacific, O'Keeffe was forging her own path towards becoming known as "the mother of American Modernism". Says Harding: "All three of them stuck with conventional genres: still life, landscape, and all deployed an abstraction/distraction to some extent within their exploration. Preston was the most consistent in working with still life ... she used that very safe type of art genre to be very experimental. However, O'Keeffe took it a step further, where she removed the still life from the conventional vase-on-the-table and started painting these amazing magnified images of flowers and leaves and various aspects of nature. That was her extension of what was otherwise a very historical genre."

Mimocchi says *Making Modernism* aims to expand our thinking of these three artists: "Not just as great Australian artists or American artists; we want to think of them as great Modernists. We want to think of them not just in terms of their relevance to a national culture but to international Modernism as a whole." ■ *Making Modernism, until February 19, 2017 at Heide; March 11–June 11, 2017, at QAG; July 1–October 2, 2017, at AGNSW. For details, go to www.heide.com.au, www.qagoma.qld.gov.au, www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au.*

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