

From the collection

Existing in the middle ground between abstraction and figuration, James Ross's pastel drawings play host to a range of organic forms.

Artist-in-residence at Victoria College's Prahran Faculty of Art and Design during 1984, the Elam-trained artist created a series of pastel drawings on paper while in Melbourne. Closely allied to his paintings of the period, they each contain a central ambiguous figural shape that is both an entity and an agent. This figure is meant to be both allusive and elusive, as the artist explains.

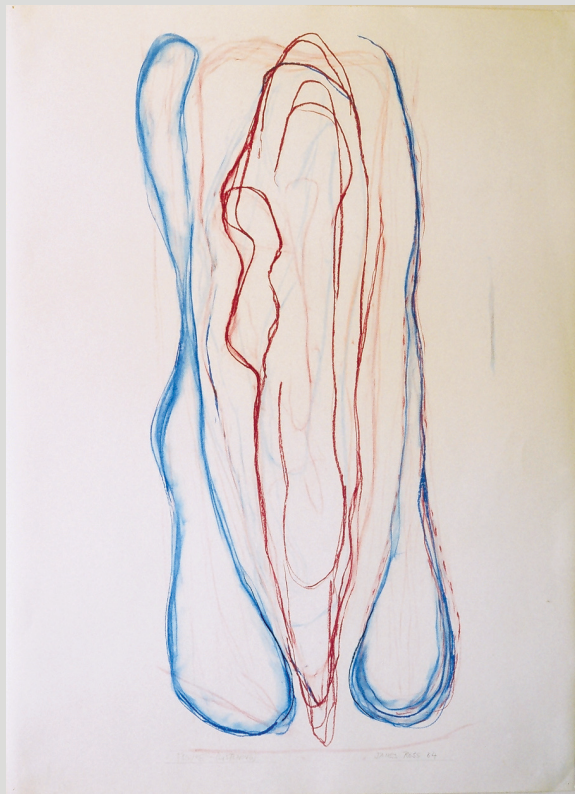
"My paintings have connotations of what the viewer can innately recognise as 'figural', yet they are also cognisant of the evolutionary language of painting itself. The language of painting as it affects my work includes notions of colour as poetic entity; drawings as buried, figural mark; shape as colour-space – all towards an archetypal, totemic end."

As in the 1947 painting of *The Listener* by Colin McCahon, who was Ross's teacher at Elam, the central motif in this work is reminiscent of a human head, turned away from the viewer, in lost profile. Surrounding blue and pink aural imagery – ear shapes or echoes rippling out – evoke the active listening of the title.

References to the musicians of Greek mythology, Orpheus and Eurydice, are made in other works by the artist from this period, and the imagery here is suggestive of Echo's unrequited love for Narcissus, who was transfixed by his own reflection.

Along with this intertextuality and negotiation of a third "formless" area between the traditional oppositions of form and content, there is also great pleasure taken in materials. The paper has been sealed with a primer of brilliant white gesso – chalky pigment mixed with glue – over which the intensely coloured lines left by the oil pastel glide or are softened into whispery smudges.

"The Red Studio", a survey of James Ross's work over the last 25 years through the chromatic constant of red, is currently on show at the Gus Fisher Gallery.



JAMES ROSS (b.1948), *Figure (Listening)*, 1984, pastel on paper; The University of Auckland Art Collection.