

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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## ERN MALLEY: THE HOAX AND BEYOND

The notorious Ern Malley Affair of 1943–44 was Australia's greatest literary hoax and its impact on Australian cultural history has resonated for more than sixty years. **Ern Malley: The Hoax and Beyond** will open at Heide Museum of Modern Art from 22 July to 15 November 2009.

Through a range of artworks, original documents and publications **Ern Malley: The Hoax and Beyond** explores this remarkable tale of deception, which was the brainchild of two young Sydney poets Harold Stewart and James McAuley. In October 1943 Stewart and McAuley composed sixteen modernist-style verses by the fictitious poet Ern Malley. They sent them to Max Harris, the co-editor with Heide founder John Reed of the radical cultural journal *Angry Penguins*. The poets' aim was to ridicule the perceived modernist pretensions of *Angry Penguins*, its editors and contributors.

Ern Malley's 'life' and poetic endeavours were outlined in an accompanying letter to Harris from Ern's sister, the equally fictitious Ethel Malley, who claimed she had found the unpublished verses among Ern's belongings after his premature death. She wrote that she had followed the advice of a friend to send them to Harris. And so the trap was set and baited.

Harris and Reed fell for the ruse. Impressed with Malley's talent, they devoted an entire issue of *Angry Penguins* to the poems, which Stewart and McAuley then exposed as a hoax. Within days the story was a sensation in the local press, and was soon international news, hitting the headlines in the *London Times*, *Time* magazine and *Newsweek*. The ensuing scandal severely damaged the reputations of Harris, Reed and *Angry Penguins*, despite attempts to justify the creative merit of the verses. Moreover, Max Harris was prosecuted for publishing 'indecent advertisement' based on the poems' explicit content.

The Heide exhibition introduces the hoax with portraits of the main protagonists – Harold Stewart and James McAuley, Max Harris, John and Sunday Reed, Sidney Nolan, Albert Tucker and the imaginary Ern Malley himself, along with the various editions of the hoax poems, issues of *Angry Penguins*, and news clippings reporting the scandal. Also on display are facsimiles of 11 surrealist collages made by Stewart soon after the poems and intended – though never sent – as an elaboration of the hoax. The farcical trial of Max Harris is represented with a powerful painting and series of cartoons by Douglas Roberts and a range of archival documents from the State Library of Victoria.

The poems continue to inspire artists and writers and the exhibition will include a selection of compelling paintings, works on paper and sculptures by Sidney Nolan and Garry Shead on specific Malley poems, as well as a variety of items that extend the life of the hoax, including a fake movie poster, a jazz record cover, an artist's book, Peter Carey's novel *My Life as a Fake* and more. The far-reaching fascination with the hoax is revealed in a 1948 short film, *The Well-Wrought Urn*, made by University of Michigan students about the last day in the life of Ern Malley.

Today, sixty years on, the debate about the poems' literary merit shows no signs of diminishing.

Curators Kendrah Morgan and David Rainey are available for interview.

Heide will also have a range of exciting Public Programs associated with the exhibition as part of the Melbourne Writers Festival, Friday 21 August – Sunday 30 August 2009.

**Ern Malley: The Hoax and Beyond**  
**22 July – 15 November 2009**  
**Heide Museum of Modern Art**  
**Curator: Kendrah Morgan**

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**Heide Museum of Modern Art**

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Tue–Fri 10.00am–5.00pm

Sat/Sun/Public Hols 12.00noon–5.00pm

Closed Good Friday

Admission: Adult \$12, Senior \$10, Concession \$8,

Gardens free

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