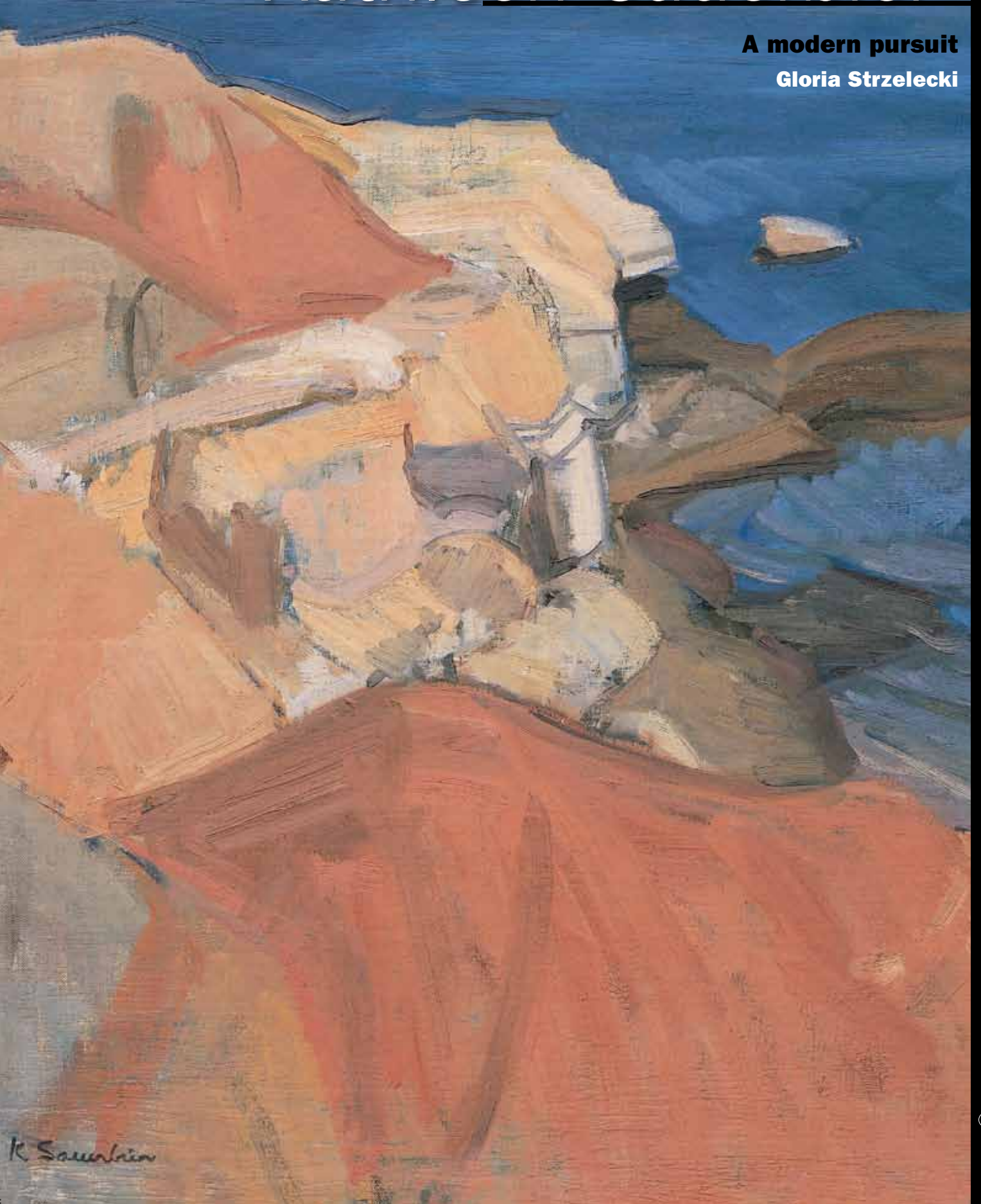


# Kathleen Sauerbier

**A modern pursuit**

**Gloria Strzelecki**



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Gloria Strzelecki, a freelance curator and writer, is presently Gallery Manager at the Adelaide Central School of Art. She has worked at the Art Gallery of South Australia as a curatorial research assistant, and from 2007 until 2009 was co-director of a contemporary art space, 'A Room of Her Own', which she established in Adelaide. She lived in New York during 2009.

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# Foreword

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I am most excited to have been involved with this book and exhibition, as it is the most significant step towards the due recognition of Kathleen Sauerbier's art.

Kathleen was a lovely presence in our lives, while we were growing up, with her sense of humour and her love of family. As one of her four nieces I was privileged to care for her, particularly in the last eleven years of her life. During this time I was most amazed at her consistency with her ongoing love of painting, design, books and music. She also maintained her passion for the natural world particularly animals, flowers and her wonderful garden and forest at Donvale. Above all her modesty and love of simplicity stayed with her throughout.

It is poignant that the evolvment of this book and exhibition has taken place at Carrick Hill, the home of Kath's good friend Ursula Hayward, with whom she spent many happy hours.

I would like to thank the people who have made all this possible, in particular Jane Hylton, who has pursued Kath over many years, Richard Heathcote, Director of Carrick Hill, and Michael Bollen of Wakefield Press.

The commitment, tireless research, creative energy and application to detail by Gloria Strzelecki have been outstanding in bringing to life a colourful period of Australian art. We are all indebted to her. Thank you.

*Luise Andrewartha*

**Flowers**, c. 1939, oil on canvas, 65.3 x 53.2 cm (sight);

Private collection; Photograph by Garry Sommerfeld



# Preface

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In the history of Australian art of the twentieth century, many of the pioneers of modernism were women. Names like Margaret Preston, Grace Cossington Smith, Grace Crowley and Dorrit Black are prominent among those who explored new techniques, varied palettes and adventurous compositions, and dared to step beyond the staid corridors of conservatism.

A remarkable number of these women artists were South Australian. Margaret Preston was born in Adelaide and ultimately settled in Sydney. Before leaving for a second trip overseas in 1912 she taught the impressionable young Stella Bowen, also Adelaide-born. Bowen chose to live her entire adult life in England and France, the latter also home to another expatriate South Australian, Preston's friend Bessie Davidson. Other South Australian women artists chose to study overseas but then returned to their birthplace to live and work, such as the significantly influential Dorrit Black in Adelaide.

During the 1930s and 1940s a number of younger South Australians – including artists like Jacqueline Hick and Dora Chapman who had studied abroad – were part of a loose group who in their formative years were drawn to the remarkably varied and beautiful Fleurieu Peninsula south of Adelaide. Because of the gentle nature of its landscape and flourishing vineyards the Fleurieu Peninsula has been likened to Provence in France. Its stunning and frequently dramatic coastline, as well as its proximity to South Australia's capital has made it an ideal and popular holiday destination since the late nineteenth century. Its landscape was also admirably suited to modernist interpretation.

On her return to South Australia in 1928 after studying in London, Kathleen Sauerbier re-acquainted herself with this region, already familiar to her through her family. Hers are

among the more dynamic of any artist's images of this southern landscape – dramatic compositions of cliffs, sea and rolling hills painted in broad loose strokes, in a range of muted pinks and oranges, greens and mauves. Later, as a resident of Melbourne, Sauerbier continued to engage with her subjects – particularly the city itself – with the same modernist approach that energised her student work in London and her South Australian landscapes.

The name Kathleen Sauerbier is not yet widely known in Australian art. This is partly because of her relatively limited output, substantially restricted by her health. Nevertheless Sauerbier has been recognised in the place of her birth and a one-person commercial exhibition in Adelaide in 1984 was a response to growing interest in her work. Later acknowledgements, which sadly she did not live to see, were inclusions in exhibitions like the Art Gallery of South Australia's *South Australian Women Artists: paintings from the 1890s to the 1940s* in 1994, and the more wide-ranging *Modern Australian Women: paintings and prints 1925–1945* held in 2001. Her work in the Fleurieu Peninsula and her influence on South Australia's best-known twentieth-century landscape painter, Horace Trener, were acknowledged in the 1998 Fleurieu Biennale exhibition and catalogue *A Fleurieu Heritage*.

Gloria Strzelecki's 2006 thesis on Kathleen Sauerbier was a well-researched and comprehensive document. It is gratifying to see Strzelecki's continuing interest in Sauerbier culminate in this book and the exhibition at Carrick Hill that it accompanies. She is to be congratulated – both will further raise public awareness of the art of Kathleen Sauerbier and do much to bring it the broader acknowledgement it so richly deserves.

*Jane Hylton*



*Haystacks near the sea*, c. 1930, oil on canvas, 34.2 x 39.8 cm (sight); Private collection



**Melbourne from Spencer Street Bridge 2**, 1938–1948, oil on canvas on board, 60.4 x 67.4 cm (sight); Private collection; Photograph by Mick Bradley

South Australia's coastal region south of Adelaide has been an inspiration for artists from the time of colonial settlement in the 1830s. From the late 1920s through to the mid 1930s Kathleen Sauerbier was among the first artists to respond to the landscape of the Fleurieu Peninsula using a modernist approach. Focusing on light, colour and form, her landscapes expressed the fluid poetry of nature, rather than a literal representation of it. Painting the bare essentials of a landscape, she depicted the area as an emotive state, emphasising that 'painting and poetry are akin'.<sup>1</sup>

In addition to her coastal landscapes, Sauerbier's Melbourne streetscapes were a direct response to her relationship with the modern metropolis, depicting the fast-paced action and spirit of a city during late 1930s. Capturing the basic elements of her subjects, Sauerbier's still life paintings and portraits were also poetic in their translation. Like her landscapes, these works continued to be direct responses to her life and they too hinted towards the strong importance that modern art held in her life.

Like so many other Australian artists wishing to connect with the modern world, travel to Britain and France seemed a necessity for Sauerbier. Her interest in modern form and aesthetics saw her attend art school in London under the tutelage of some of the most respected teachers of the time, such as Bernard Meninsky (1891-1950).

Sauerbier's contemporaries taught her the importance of form, shape and colour and this provided the artistic grounding from which her practice grew. Europe also exposed her to some of the world's greatest art collections and artists who were inspired by local landscapes and lifestyles. The works that Sauerbier created subsequent to this exposure were the first instances in which she captured her personal connections to a place.

Returning to Australia was difficult for Kathleen Sauerbier on both a personal and artistic level. She felt a strong connection to Europe, particularly France, and she struggled to gain the recognition she hoped for back in Australia. There was little critical attention paid to the floral still lives and portraits she exhibited at the South Australian Society of Arts.

A turning point in the development of Sauerbier's art came in the in the early 1930s. It was during this period that Sauerbier rediscovered the delightful Fleurieu Peninsula, and in particular Port Willunga, a location that would provide profound inspiration. While she was already familiar with this south coast region, she had not explored the pictorial qualities of the landscape to their full potential prior to 1932. The area provided ideal forms and colours for the creation of modernist works of art and was also ideally suited to the simple and modest modern lifestyle Sauerbier strived for, which was deeply connected to her art.

Her first one-person exhibition was held in 1934 at the South Australian Society of Arts and included many Port Willunga landscapes. Although the exhibition received mixed reviews, it spurred much attention and interest in her work.

Sauerbier exhibited with the South Australian Society of Arts in Adelaide until 1935, when she also began exhibiting with Group Twelve in Melbourne and later with the Melbourne branch of the Contemporary Art Society. After she married in 1937 she took up residence in Melbourne. The urban landscape was dramatically different from her beloved south coast, but nevertheless she was inspired by the buildings and bustling activity of this impressive and distinctive city. This new and starkly contrasting source of inspiration heralded yet another progression in her art practice.

Even while residing in Melbourne, Sauerbier's connection to Port Willunga remained strong.





The ocean, cliffs, buildings and haystacks that she often painted were ingrained in her and she continued to feel a strong and deep affinity with the South Australian landscape. Born into a family that had deep roots in the Fleurieu Peninsula, her interest in, and spiritual connection with, the landscape were inevitable. Port Willunga was Sauerbier's *Locus amoenus*, literally a pleasant place; a place where she felt comfortable and at ease. Hence, on an annual basis Sauerbier would revisit the area to take stock and replenish her inspiration. The familiarity and comfort of Port Willunga would have allowed her the freedom to continue to develop her artistic direction and these visits were important to her creativity.

By the 1950s the artist had moved away from inner Melbourne to the outer suburb of Donvale and began to focus on fabric design, jewellery design and still life paintings. Her passion for landscape design was also evident in her gardening and interest in homemaking. The commitments of being an active artist and maintaining a home and garden proved demanding and resulted in a sudden decrease in exhibiting. However, she remained inspired by the flowers around her, especially white arum lilies and agapanthus, and she would often sketch them.

Sauerbier strove for a modern approach to her art and life and she believed that both were inextricably linked. *Kathleen Sauerbier: A modern pursuit* (2011) is the first major retrospective exhibition and publication devoted solely to the life and art of Kathleen Sauerbier. Both seek to recognise and celebrate the artist's important contribution to Australian art history.

***Jetty ramp and Howe's fishing lookout, Port Willunga looking south***, c. 1935, oil on canvas, 54.0 x 65.5 cm

(sight); Courtesy of Lauraine Diggins Fine Art

# Chapter 1

## Beginnings

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The Sauerbier family traces its Australian origins to a German settler, Christian Sauerbier, who arrived in Australia in 1845. Christian Sauerbier settled near Happy Valley, South Australia, and in 1855 he married Margaret Ann Tapley. Christian and Margaret Sauerbier had five children, John Christian Sauerbier (1856–1923), John James Sauerbier (1858–1938), George Sauerbier (1860–1936), and two daughters, both of whom died in their infancy.

By 1856 Christian Sauerbier held eleven sections of land near Happy Valley and developed the Happy Valley Estate, off Taylors Road, where he was renowned for his quality stud stock and orange grove.<sup>2</sup> When Christian died in 1893, his eldest son, John Christian Sauerbier, took over the estate. During World War I, when anti-German sentiment was at its height, John Christian Sauerbier changed his name to John Chris Aberfoyle and in the years to come the South Australian suburb of Aberfoyle Park took his name.<sup>3</sup> In 1903, the youngest of Christian Sauerbier's sons, George Sauerbier, purchased Wickam Park in McLaren Flat on the Fleurieu Peninsula. There he established a pure Southdown sheep stud after importing a ram and three ewes from England in 1900.<sup>4</sup>

The second son, John James Sauerbier, settled in the Adelaide seaside suburb of Brighton, where he married Mary Anne Louisa Locke on the 27 February 1902 at the Brighton Inn. John James Sauerbier was a prominent figure in local government – an elected councillor of the northward district for the City of Brighton and the Chairman of the Public Works Committee. On 21 January 1903, John James and Mary Anne Louisa Sauerbier celebrated the birth of their first child, Kathleen Margaret Sauerbier. Three siblings for Sauerbier followed – John Tapley, Louis Christian and Gladys Mary. The family lived in the South Australian suburbs of Brighton and then Malvern.



A young Kathleen Sauerbier, c. 1906; Private collection

One of Kathleen Sauerbier's closest friends was Audrey Hardy, whose family had founded the Hardy Wine Company. Around 1917, Sauerbier and Hardy were enrolled at Saint Peter's Girls School, Adelaide, and the two girls bonded over their shared interest in art. Sauerbier was an accomplished student and her academic achievements were often recorded in the school magazines. Her short story, 'The humour of a single line tram service', won second prize in a school competition and was subsequently published in the May 1920 school magazine, *Chronicles of Saint Peter's Girls*. She excelled in most subjects, but she found her strengths in French and art. An art student under Miss E.M. Barnes, Sauerbier's name was often seen on the school's Royal Drawing