

TIM JOHNSON

Counterculture

On display in Gallery 2, *Counterculture* comprises small- and medium-scale works which derive their imagery from subjects of longstanding interest to Johnson, including blues music, Tibetan Buddhism and UFOs.

"The idea of a 'counterculture' was something I grew up with," says Johnson, who was born in Sydney in 1947 and gravitated towards conceptual concerns early on as an artist.

"It was about standing outside the existing system and creating a new culture that was empathetic, peaceful and creative.

"As it turns out, many of the things I make art about are like this – alternative, non-Eurocentric, initially 'underground' or obscure but eventually widespread."

Johnson's knowledge of, and affection for, early Blues is apparent in a grid depicting 25 legends of the genre, each delicately painted on a 10 x 10cm canvas.

Included are such foundational figures as Leadbelly, Ma Rainey, Blind Lemon Jefferson, Robert Johnson, Memphis Minnie, Lonnie Johnson and Sister Rosetta Tharpe.

While most of the squares are monochrome, colour has crept into several portraits, including those of Janis Joplin and Jimi Hendrix, reflecting advances from black-and-white to colour film in the photographic source imagery Johnson has utilised.

Along with Punk Rock, Blues has been Johnson's music mainstay for decades and he often listens to it while painting.

"Robert Johnson influenced rock'n'roll and Lonnie Johnson influenced jazz," he explains. "The blues was appropriated by a white audience as a way of inventing rock'n'roll, especially through Leadbelly. George Harrison once said: 'No Leadbelly, no rock'n'roll.'"

Just as musicians riff off one another, so do artists, and collaboration has long been a part of Johnson's practice. Included in the show are paintings co-authored with Daniel Bogunovic, a self-taught artist from Los Angeles with whom Johnson has been collaborating for 15 years.

Yamantaka 2022 depicts a Buddhist protector deity. It was created using the pair's paint-and-post method, whereby Bogunovic sends Johnson a canvas on which he's painted a Buddhist figure in the middle and Johnson responds accordingly.

"I've been studying and practising Tibetan Buddhism for more than 30 years, and it's become an interesting contribution to my art," says Johnson.

"I like the idea of painting as an abstract-expressionist activity but with figurative or recognisable imagery," he says. "I'm using more colour than usual and brightening everything up. I'm also trying to paint straight from the heart a bit more, without research or planning, but rather finding something inside myself."

Other works made collaboratively with Bogunovic include six small UFO paintings on 'found' canvases, and 10 works on paper, titled 'Entities', featuring flying saucers, aliens and apparitions amid rural landscapes.

"I've been including UFOs in my work for a long time, but just recently the Pentagon established a website to share declassified information about them and it's being talked about openly," says Johnson. "Once again, something that used to be marginal is now mainstream."

"I fuse aspects of different cultures in my works because the imagery is compatible and also because I see parallels between belief systems," says Johnson.

Tim Johnson

Tim Johnson (born Sydney, 1947) studied at the University of New South Wales and the University of Sydney between 1966 and 1970.

He has exhibited his work nationally and internationally for over 50 years, with highlights including *Documenta 9* in Kassel, Germany in 1992, *Antipodean Currents* at the Guggenheim Museum, New York, United States in 1995, the Guangzhou Triennial, China in 2012 and *Australia* at the Royal Academy of Arts, London, UK in 2013.

Johnson was curated into the Biennale of Sydney in 1986, 1992 and 2000, and a retrospective of his work, titled *Painting Ideas*, was staged at the Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney and Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane in 2009–10.

Johnson's work can be found in the collections of the National Gallery of Australia and the National Portrait Gallery, all state galleries, University of New South Wales, University of Sydney, Macquarie University, Monash University, Griffiths University, MOCA Brisbane, Artbank, Araluen Arts Centre, Alice Springs, NT and others.