

MESSUMS:

Australia: Landscape and Abstraction

Australian art has had several 'moments' in London but by far the most positive was *Recent Australian Painting*, held at the Whitechapel Gallery in June - July 1961.¹ The show came about largely in reaction to the Tate's difficulties in organising a show of contemporary Australian art, a project that director, John Rothenstein, had been discussing since 1949. There was finally some movement by 1957, but the Trustees of the Tate, believing it was essential to go through official channels – and most certainly thinking of the level of financial support they might command – said they would only approve a show sponsored by the Australian Commonwealth Government. This ensured that more progressive local bodies such as the Contemporary Art Society or the State Gallery Directors' Council would have no input into the selection of artists.

Prime-Minister, Robert Menzies, an idolatrous Anglophile, saw this as an opportunity to sell his country to prospective British migrants. "They should know that things of the spirit mean something to Australia as well as material things,"² he told the Commonwealth Art Advisory Board, whom he had hand-picked to reflect his own staunchly conservative tastes.

The CAAB fell in line with Menzies's vision for an exhibition that demonstrated the development of a great nation through carefully

¹ Whitechapel Art Gallery. 1961. *Recent Australian Painting*. With contributions by Kenneth Clark, Bryan Robertson, and Robert Hughes. Curator Bryan Robertson. Exhibition catalogue. London: Whitechapel Art Gallery, June–July 1961.

² Menzies to the CAAB, January 1960, *Meeting of CAAB, Sydney Jan–Feb 1960*, A463, 1960/3022; *Tate Gallery Exhibition, London: Policy*, A463, 1967/2704, NAA., quoted by Sarah Scott, 'A Colonial Legacy: Australian Painting at the Tate Gallery London, 1963', https://openresearch.repository.anu.edu.au/bitstream/1885/20368/2/01_Scott_A_colonial_legacy:_Australian_2008.

Cf. also Simon Pierson:

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/310770990_Bryan_Robertson_abstract_expressionism_and_late_Modernism_in_Recent_Australian_Painting_1961

and

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/297667691_Recent_Australian_Painting_1961_a_Jardin_Exotique_for_London's_East_End

selected works of art - which was precisely the opposite of what Rothenstein and his colleagues wanted. Their intention had been to provide a showcase for younger artists, presenting Australia as a country making its own, distinctive contribution to modern art.

CAAB Chairman, Will Ashton, put the kibosh on this idea in a letter to Menzies, explaining why certain state gallery directors should not be allowed to have a say in the selection, as "the sort of art that people would be seeing would most likely be the extreme modernistic type."³

Ashton believed it was the CAAB's duty "to prevent this sort of art leaving Australia." Menzies, who cheerfully described himself as "a reactionary and a traditionalist,"⁴ agreed wholeheartedly.

When it eventually arrived at the Tate in 1963, *Australian Painting: Colonial, Impressionist, Contemporary*⁵ would be tweaked to include a present-day component, with works by artists such as Sidney Nolan, Arthur Boyd, Russell Drysdale, William Dobell and John Olsen, who formed the overwhelming focus of critical responses. The historical works, upon which Menzies and the CAAB had set such store, were largely ignored.

Fifty years later, *Australia*⁶ – another imaginatively titled survey of Australian art held at the Royal Academy, would make exactly the same mistakes. In 2013 the blame couldn't be laid at the door of the CAAB, which had gone the way of the (other) dinosaurs, it was largely the doing of the National Gallery of Australia in Canberra, which bullied the R.A. into a bloated, incoherent hang that tried to cover the entire field of Australian art history. The NGA backed its exhibition concept with significant sponsorship, effectively buying the right to humiliate itself in London. Rarely had a show better illustrated Santayana's well-worn maxim about those who cannot remember the past being condemned to repeat it.

³ Will Ashton, quoted in Scott, *Ibid.*

⁴ 'Rare Chance to See Paintings', *Sunday Mail* (Adelaide), 17 March 1962. Quoted in Scott. *Ibid.*

⁵ Tate Gallery. 1963. *Antipodean Vision: Australian Painting: Colonial, Impressionist, Contemporary*. With contributions by Clive Turnbull, Elizabeth Young and Daniel Thomas. Exhibition catalogue. Melbourne: Cheshire, 1962. Tate Gallery in association with CAAB, Jan–Feb 1963.

⁶ Royal Academy of Arts, *Australia*, 21 September– 8 December 2013

With the Whitechapel show of 1961, director, Bryan Robertson, aimed to bypass the Menzies government and show those contemporary artists the Tate was unable to include. *Recent Australian Painting* would act as a spoiler for the 1963 survey, creating a sense of excitement that would not be repeated by the historical works favoured by the CAAB. Resentment was already running deep among artists in Australia, who felt the government was sabotaging their chances abroad. In a provocative catalogue essay for the Whitechapel show, the 22-year-old critic, Robert Hughes, put the boot into Menzies and the CAAB.

"Much of the blame for the present isolation of Australian art can be laid at the door of this singular body," he roared. As for the Prime Minister, he was a man "whose longstanding dislike of contemporary art is paralleled only by his ignorance of its history."⁷

None of this made it into the published version of the essay. There was, however, a lot more about "isolation", including the brash assertion that an Australian sensibility was formed by "a complete isolation from the Renaissance tradition". Bernard Smith, the dean of Australian art historians, would never let Hughes off the hook for this hasty rhetorical flourish.⁸ It was nonsense to suggest that Australian culture had developed in ignorance of the "Renaissance tradition" when colonial Australia had modelled itself as closely as possible on Mother England, which in 1961 was still widely referred to as "home". Hughes's argument would have been stronger had he championed a homegrown vitalism in contemporary Australian art that owed little to those inherited traditions.

There were 55 artists in the Whitechapel show, of both figurative and abstract persuasions, including familiar figures such as Sidney Nolan, Arthur Boyd and Charles Blackman, but also three paintings by a dynamic newcomer, Brett Whiteley, whose *Untitled red painting* (1960) would be purchased by the Tate. Smith approved of the selection, but not the framing of the show, in which tropical plants were used to create an exotic atmosphere. He felt Robertson

⁷ Robert Hughes in an expurgated section of his final draft for the catalogue introduction to *Recent Australian Painting*. Whitechapel archives, [WAG/EXH/2/78/4].

⁸ Bernard Smith, 'The Myth of Isolation' (1961), repinted in *The Antipodean Manifesto: Essays in Art and History*, Oxford U.P., 1976.

presented the artists as another form of exotica, as “noble savages” from the other side of the planet.

If this was Robertson’s strategy, it seems to have worked. The Whitechapel show was in tune with the temper of the times in which everything new, young and exotic captured the public interest. The Tate show, two years later, came across as a stodgy historical survey, with an inadequate selection of works by artists who had been seen to better advantage at the Whitechapel.

One of Robertson’s most significant inclusions was Ian Fairweather (1891-1974), born in Scotland to parents who returned to service in India, leaving him for the first ten years of his life in the company of a great-aunt. Fairweather would serve in World War One, where he spent four years in prisoner-of-war camps, drawing, and teaching himself Chinese and Japanese. After the war, he would study at the Slade School of Fine Art, from 1920-24, before setting off on his years of wandering.

Fairweather was a loner, a solitary, who would seek out remote places, from Norway to Canada, to China, India, the Phillipines and Bali, where he would live frugally, painting with whatever materials came to hand. By 1961 he was settled in a hut of his own construction on Bribie Island, off the coast of Brisbane. From his hermit’s nest he would send paintings to Sydney for regular exhibitions at the Macquarie Galleries, which became huge drawcards, as buyers queued waiting for the doors to open.

Much admired in the 1960s, Fairweather’s importance has only continued to grow. He must be counted as the single biggest influence on several generations of Australian painters who have felt inspired by his expressive blend of abstraction and figuration, let alone the single-minded dedication he brought to his work.

The second major influence on these generations was an artist who never made it into the Whitechapel show. Tony Tuckson (1921-73), was born at Port Said, in Egypt, the son of a British Suez Canal pilot. He would go on to study art at Finchley and Kingston. In the Second World War he would serve in the Royal Air Force from 1940-46, taking part in Spitfire battles. Arriving in Australia in 1942, he met and

married the potter, Margaret Bisset, settling in Sydney permanently from 1946.

Like other artists who had served in the war, such as Jon Molvig, Guy Warren and John Coburn, Tuckson would take advantage of the Commonwealth Reconstruction Training Scheme to study at the National Art School in Sydney. Having graduated with honours in 1949, he took a job at the Art Gallery of NSW, where he rapidly rose to the rank of Assistant Director. During the years he worked at this institution, Tuckson travelled to America where he saw the work of the Abstract Expressionists, and to Northern Australia, where he became an admirer of Aboriginal art. Both of these artforms would influence his own work, which was produced on evenings and weekends. Throughout his years at the AGNSW, Tuckson never held an exhibition, as he felt it would entail a conflict of interests.

When he finally decided to ask Sydney's Watters Gallery for a show in 1970, he emerged as a fully-formed Abstract Expressionist, with an understanding of the style far in advance of most local abstract painters. Tuckson would have only one more show, in 1973, the year he died of cancer, aged only 52.

Like Fairweather, the raw, bold nature of Tuckson's work has made him an important influence on younger painters, from the 1970s onwards. Take these artists out of the picture, and it's almost impossible to imagine the work of figures such as Ann Thomson (b.1933), Elisabeth Cummings (b.1934), Roy Jackson (1944-2013), John Peart (1945-2013), Idris Murphy (b. 1949) Peter Godwin (b.1953), Angus Nivison (b.1953), Julie Harris (b.1953), John R. Walker (b.1957), Ildiko Kovacs (b.1962), or Robert Hirschmann (b. 1968). It would be easy to add another dozen names to this list, including artists still in their twenties.

Each of these artists has a strong abstract component to their work, but also a distinctive sense of the landscape. While Godwin and Cummings are notable painters of interiors, when they turn their attention to landscape, it's with the same densely layered, gestural approach one finds in Fairweather, although the finished works have a completely different character.

There is also a prominent influence of Aboriginal art, of which Fairweather and Tuckson were early admirers. Above all, artists have responded to the freedom with which Indigenous painters depict a landscape that might appear all but featureless to an artist accustomed to the scenery of Britain or Europe. But where an Indigenous painter might record physical aspects of the landscape in connection with age-old Creation stories, generating unusual choices of scale or colour, their white counterparts are mainly concerned with the play of light, which causes mountains and rivers to shimmer like mirages in the heat.

Out of this blend of influences, a loose, undefined school of Australian painting has emerged that largely fulfils the promises of Bryan Robertson's Whitechapel exhibition. Indeed, it was already latent in Kenneth Clark's preface to the Whitechapel catalogue, in which he wrote: "less than fifteen years ago, when I told my friends in England that Australia was about to add something entirely fresh to contemporary painting, they thought I was out of my mind. And when they asked me to account for it, of course I couldn't. I could only mumble something about the dead white trees and the feeling of an Australian myth." ⁹

Sixty years on from that assessment, the obsession with an Australian "myth" has subsided, in favour of a more intimate relationship with the land. The 'mythical' paintings of artists such as Sidney Nolan, Arthur Boyd and Russell Drysdale, were made at a time when the Outback was considered a hostile, trackless waste, unvisited by most Australians. We still worshipped the explorers and outlaws who made their way across that land, or escaped British justice in the bush.

Today, the bush has been tamed by satellite tracking devices, four-wheel-drives, and adventure tourism. Australians have become enthusiastic travellers within their own land, and have developed a sympathy for the traditional Aboriginal way of life that was virtually unthinkable in the 1960s. In the public mind, the myth of the great white explorer has given way to an understanding that for the original inhabitants of the continent, Australia didn't *need* to be discovered.

⁹ Kenneth Clark, Op. Cit. Whitechapel Art Gallery.

As we have relinquished our Promethean fantasies of conquering the bush, we have begun to appreciate how Aboriginal people lived in relative harmony with nature. This understanding is crucial to recent Australian painting that blends abstraction and landscape, although one might still agree with Robertson, who wrote in his Whitechapel preface that Australian artists do not turn “a *quiescent* gaze on life or nature... but challenging and interrogatory.”¹⁰

He also suggested that “Australian artists feel a special bond with the aboriginal art of their country for it is the nearest thing they have to a tradition close at hand.” Although this brings us back to the dubious idea of Australia’s isolation from Renaissance traditions, it does at least chart the feeling, even in 1961, that Aboriginal art was in some sense, fundamental to the Australian experience of landscape.

Of our list of Australian painters who have learned from Fairweather and Tuckson, who have admired both Aboriginal art and Abstract Expressionists such as Willem De Kooning, Ann Thomson takes precedence. Born in Brisbane, she visited Fairweather on Bribie Island, and studied with another legendary expressionist, Jon Molvig. In Sydney, she attended the National Art School in those years when it went by the more prosaic title of East Sydney Tech.

At the age of 90, Thomson is painting with a gestural freedom that has been underwritten by decades of toil in the studio, making paintings that veer towards pure abstraction, then others in which forms coalesce into recognisable landscapes or seascapes. At no stage has Thomson ever seen herself as part of a school or a movement, but today she appears as a trailblazer for a recognisable style of Australian painting that draws its energy and inspiration from the landscape, and its formal language from a wide range of sources.

It's a style that most of its practitioners would prefer not to categorise. It's simply painting. It's what comes naturally. It's the sum total of an artist's life experience in a country that has never been entirely sure of its identity, and has stifled those doubts with a range of heroic myths. Today, Australian painters are prepared to address the land with a new directness and a new respect. It is, as

¹⁰ Bryan Robertson, *Ibid.*

Bryan Robertson put it, an interrogation rather than a meek transcription, but it's also an expression of confidence in the transcendent power of painting – a feeling that Australians are finally coming to terms with who they are, and where they belong.

(2,523 words)

John McDonald is art critic for the Sydney Morning Herald & film critic for the Australian Financial Review

johnmcdonald.net.au

John McDonald
mob. 0402 943 058

john@johnmcdonald.net.au