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Some Aspects of Contemporary Art in Australia

—1943—

Last year's Contemporary Art Exhibition, held in Sydney in September, has proved one thing: there is nothing that can be called 'the modern group' in this country. What we do see among the exhibitors are a number of contemporary tendencies, differing to a greater extent among themselves than any differences which they may have in common from so-called conservative and traditional art. This results from a self-effacing selection committee, which has been more democratic than even the society's constitution, which bans representative art.

No doubt the members of this committee have been distressed at times by the vision of those heavily-bound volumes one meets in the second-hand bookshops, labelled 'Modern Art', the contents of which are now dusty Victorianism. By the abolition, in effect, of a selection committee the society hopes to establish a kind of permanent contemporaneity. While the intention is perhaps the best in the world, the effect of such a policy, as with the French Academy after 1791 and the Salon des Refusés, will probably be fatal if the society still desires to preserve its identity as a body with a defined attitude and policy. On the other hand, the society could become a valuable organizing committee that would arrange a cross-section of the painting (and the sculpture?) of the country annually. Such an organization is needed, and the Contemporary Art Society, being progressive in outlook and national in compass, is the only body that looks like fulfilling this function effectively.

The tendencies in art in this country today, as reflected in this year's Contemporary Art show, are widely divergent. It is absurd nowadays to talk about 'modern art' as a single entity; and a society exhibiting so many different and conflicting tendencies

would do well to realize that it cannot hope to speak for all its members; and its critics should realize that when they speak of 'modern art' they are using a term which no longer has any significance. The quotation from Herbert Read on the Sydney catalogue, for instance, is only a view of a section, and that not the most significant, of this year's exhibitors.¹

Purely abstract and constructivist work is definitely losing its adherents. Eric Wilson shows that an accomplished technique and a feeling for design and colour can still build an abstract work into a very effective composition; and W. Armstrong, of Victoria, shows what can happen to abstractions without technique, feeling or design. Braque, after all, did these things much better, and it is doubtful whether any real importance can be attached to our colonial derivatives in his manner. Abstract art will not have a future in Australia; its rigid formalism has little place for the infusion of national qualities, for an art that derives nothing from its own place is as much an artistic misnomer as an art that gains nothing from its own time. In industrial subjects such as Wilson's *Hot Feed*, *Cold Feed*, *Steam*, Ebert's *Furnace Man and Factories—Streets—Houses* and also in Eric Thake's *Brownout*, the new content is struggling within a form evolved by the cubists from their X-ray attitude to their nineteenth-century subjects which usually look better cut to pieces anyway.

Daumier or Orozco would have been better points of departure in the search for adequate forms for these subjects.

The best painters among the modern group are not producing the most vital pictures. The paintings of S. Herman, Rah Fizelle and F. Medworth always please by their competent handling and assured technique. Medworth's experiments in various media are always a source of interest, and a constant reminder to over-ambitious amateurs that there is still a craft of painting though modernist propaganda has done much to obscure the fact.

Surrealism is not so much in evidence this year as previously. The paintings of James Gleeson are disappointing when considered in the light of the tremendous promise of last year's large picture.² There seems to have been a relapse to an earlier attitude without any appreciable gain. Still the actual painting of pictures is an achievement at present, and it is hoped that the reaffirmed allegiance to Dali will give way to something more personal in the future.

Painters like Elaine Haxton, Alice Danciger and Ivor Francis are charming within the limited sphere of conversational pieces—slight things in which technique and subject are in harmony. Their weakness lies in a tendency to slip back to the nasty

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adolescent paintings that pour from girls' high schools. Co-education might be a solution. This *Flapping Skirt* style—to coin a name from Ivor Francis' picture—has nothing particularly to do with contemporary painting and borders on the banal. Miss Haxton, with her *Street Scene, Sydney, 1942*, reproduces the Hollywood conception of the American Negro. She sees them superficially, as the eighteenth century, with its insufferable chinoiserie, saw Chinese art. A race that has consistently proved itself more artistic and rhythmically conscious when it comes to matters of plastic art could well have been spared this local comment.

Melbourne has always been the chief storm centre of Australian art, and it is from Melbourne that this year's most significant development comes. The new group is avowedly literary in its approach, and there is a strong element of propaganda in most of the paintings. Such a label is sufficient to damn them in the eyes of the more conservative, 'Moderns' and the members of the more respectable art societies. Therefore those who have the development of art in this country at heart will watch their growth with interest. The paintings of Perceval and Boyd are not nice paintings, and there is still a wide margin between the strength of conception and the painted picture, but they are at least a direct challenge to preciousness, and we have seen too much of it in the last few years in Australian art. The paintings of Bergner owe much to Daumier, but since last year his technical ability and the force of his presentation have developed. It is to be regretted that his work was not suitably hung. Arthur Boyd's paintings have a certain rawness of conception. They are ambitious works which at present levy too great a strain upon a somewhat limited technical equipment. It is precisely this strain, however, which may lead the painter to a mature style. *Progression* is a better piece of social criticism than *Blessed Are The Merciful*; it is also a better painting. The presentation of horror in painting unalleviated by any other factor, even where the realities of the subject are in every way as revolutive, usually creates in the mind of the spectator an effect opposite to that intended by the artist. Any human tendency to react sympathetically to the victims of injustice is overpowered by a physiological loathing of the disgusting. If the artists of the Melbourne group seek to arouse more than loathing, to avoid the accusation of presenting 'chambers of horror', they will have to seek to arouse a complex emotion. Robert Owen realized this when he wrote of his war poems: 'The poetry is in the pity'. This is a central problem for



Arthur Boyd, *Progression*, 1941, oil on board, 90.0 × 55.2 cm Heide Park and Art Gallery, Melbourne.

realism, and its successful solution will be fraught with significance for Australian art. Boyd's *Blessed Are The Merciful* and Nan Hortins' *Mourners* could be quoted as showing the need both to realize and to solve this problem.

The new grouping with all these deficiencies is the most vital movement in Australian art today. They are obviously painters with working-class sympathies, and painting with a proletarian bias is something new in Australian art, though its expression has been widely developed in literature. The development of painting here, as elsewhere, depends largely upon patronage. The 'squattocracy' gave the initial patronage upon which the Australian impressionism of Streeton and Heysen rode to fame and high prices. Today that particular class seems as bankrupt of ideas as of intelligent politicians, and consequently has nothing to bring to the nourishment of art. The disciples of modernism have waged wordy battles with the lingering protagonists of an art championed by an effete pastoral patriarchy, but would flirt with their descendants and gather their patrons from the owners of the large commercial houses, the young-rich, and the critics of ultra-conservative news-sheets. Such a policy invites suicide. So long as the supporters of modernism identify aesthetic sensibility with a large bank account they profess their ignorance of the real causes of the modern movement itself. The desire for this patronage is also seen in the absurd prices placed upon paintings by many amateur artists who do not depend upon painting for their livelihood. Such prices would serve a useful purpose if there were any accomplished professional painters in this country depending on the sales of their paintings for existence. The high-priced amateur painting would probably remain unsold and ensure the professional the receipt of enough money to go on painting. As there are at present no professional painters of any moment in the country, and the development of painting depends largely upon amateur and semi-professional painters, young amateurs would do well to price their pictures at a level making sales possible and in keeping with a war situation, instead of using the price as a personal estimation of what the painting might realize in Elysium. Many painters in the Contemporary Art Society have realized this and placed reasonable prices on their pictures. After all, the 'boom' periods in Australian art have passed, and their passing will not be greatly lamented.

Contemporary art has reached its adulthood and will have to begin making adult decisions, such as the cutting of apron-strings; future exhibitions, therefore, should be of great interest and importance to the development of Australian art.



Josi Bergner, *Aborigines in Fitzroy*, c.1943, oil on board, 62 × 49.5cm. Art Gallery of South Australia.