
THE NECESSITY OF AUSTRALIAN ART

AN ESSAY ABOUT INTERPRETATION



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INTRODUCTION

This essay considers how, in both contemporary and historical contexts, art is understood and thought about within the dominant white culture in Australia. In writing the essay, the authors were concerned that many recent developments in art in Australia are unable to be accounted for adequately by existing interpretations. The failure to produce a satisfactory or challenging account of contemporary art is inseparable from the problems associated with the received ways of understanding past artistic practices. The priority then was to reassess what has been valued in the standard texts on art in Australia and how this related to the values that are expressed or given meaning within art practices.

The range of recent writing on art encouraged us to work towards an understanding of the specificity of Australian culture and to see this as part of a broader historical development. This project has taken us back to the inter-war period in Australia which, increasingly, seems essential to understand and discuss. Those years, crucial to the formation of modern Australian society, were marked by changes in the character of the regional basis of the culture - changes which, in part, need to be understood in terms of the development of a peripheral capitalist formation. We have begun by proposing and locating a regional tradition as the social and cultural determinant in the period. The study of this tradition is critical for understanding the role that regionalist values assumed at the time and the influence those values continue to exert to the present.

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Regional values were affirmed through the expression of a strong attachment to place, to the land. This social relationship provided the basis on which an independent cultural identity could be claimed. The importance and value conveyed by the idea of the Australian landscape after the First World War could be explained through a number of factors: the impact of its awesome vastness on its comparatively meagre population; the crucial position that land held in radical politics in Australia during the nineteenth century; the tendency to 'claim' the antiquity of the landscape itself as a value within Australian culture, in the absence of any handed-down culture; the economic significance of pastoral wealth, and many more. Such claims overrode those of the Aboriginal inhabitants, the displacement of whom was accounted for in terms of the Social Darwinism of the day. Thus, to the extent that the expressed attachment implied a possessing (even if only in a spiritual sense) of the land, it also implied a dispossessing of the Aboriginal relationship to the land. The confrontational character of dispossession was deflected by the theory that the Aboriginal race, through natural process, would gradually vanish.

Hence, in our discussion of the regional tradition we have found it imperative to examine the way that the sense of attachment and belonging (and, by default, exclusion) was socially constructed within visual forms. This construction also reveals the imagery as one of the forms through which a patriarchal structure was symbolised and reasserted in the period following the First World War.

As the idea of a tradition developed from the latter part of the nineteenth century through to the period of the First World War, there was a concentration by artists on the searching out and expression of regional characteristics, of the people (as types), and of their environment. In painting, this process focused on the character of particular regions, districts or localities - as, for example, in the way that a landscape painter specialised in a type of bush or landscape found only in certain regions, often to the point of a personal identification with favourite painting grounds. During the inter-war period, this regional characteristic changed, becoming more associated with 'Australia' as a national entity rather than a collection of diverse and distinct regions. For the

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painter, the features of the landscape increasingly singled out were those which transcended the local, foregoing the particular for the more general. In this manner, artists were playing a significant role in the creation of a national symbolism, a visual rhetoric which is still influential in conveying cultural identification.

In the inter-war period, it was William Moore's writing which produced the most comprehensive expression of the regionally-based attitudes and values. His account of Australian art remains indispensable for an understanding of the tradition at that time, and of the cultural value which was located within the production of landscape imagery.

Yet this was also a period in which the still evolving regional tradition was being modified and transformed by - and was itself transforming and reworking - an increasingly influential modernist culture derived from Europe. Artists of the thirties and forties have been categorised as either modernist or traditionalist, or sometimes realist. While modernism has claimed for itself a role as the embodiment of progress, one finds progressive attitudes as readily within the so-called traditional as within modernist practices. In most accounts, much is made of the reactionary character of the traditional school, but little consideration has been given to the aspect of its 'anti-modernist' critique which frequently attacked the socially regressive features of modernism - a critique which modernism, in making its own defence, ignored. This conflict addresses not simply stylistic predilections, but different conceptions of the role and relationships of art in society.

However, for both artists and commentators at the time, these positions did not simply represent the particular rhetoric of differing ideological positions; they had a far more structural and theoretical function. As such, they provided a crucial means by which critical dialogue and debate could be carried on. It was this aspect which characterised Bernard Smith's writing and provided the basis by which he has assigned value to different aspects of the visual culture.

Thus, in reassessing what is valued within the practices of art in Australia, we have reconsidered the major and influential

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interpretations of Australian art history in their status as ideological constructions. Two of the three texts which have been particularly responsible for shaping the understanding and evaluation of that history have been recently reprinted and are again widely available. These are William Moore's two-volume work *The Story of Australian Art* (1934) and Bernard Smith's *Place, Taste and Tradition* (1944). The third text, Bernard Smith's *Australian Painting* (1962/1971), has been through several reprints following the publication of the second edition and has remained the standard text for students of Australian art. A third edition has been commissioned. Each of these books established, at different times, a position of authority in unfolding a story of significant artistic traditions and achievements in this country. But it was Smith's later book which, more than any other, has established the way in which Australian art was to be seen and written about, and has effectively displaced both his own and Moore's earlier books.

Each of those interpretations played a crucial role in elucidating and forming, not simply an approach, but attitudes of mind and systems of value in Australian art and, more broadly, in Australian cultural life. It seemed necessary then to reread the key texts to recognise the way in which each participated in the construction of an audience for art in Australia. While, of course, it cannot be supposed that all those who look at and value Australian art also read the historical interpretations, it can be assumed that the interpretations are in part determined by and responsive to the historical moment in which they are written, and that they impart and confirm (or challenge) a set of relations which confer value on certain works of art and not others.

The impact of an orthodoxy in art historical writing is particularly evident in the publishing boom which has occurred over the past one and a half decades. Besides the many monographic studies, a few writers have engaged broader subjects or historical surveys - for example, Graeme Sturgeon on Australian sculpture, Humphrey McQueen on modernism, Richard Haese on the 1930s and 1940s, Janine Burke on women artists and Gary Catalano on the late 1950s and 1960s. These authors have in different ways sought not only to rewrite or amplify the history of twentieth century art in

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Australia, but also to grant a privileged place to particular artists or artistic practices. However - and this is where their work seems to be most open to argument - what remains overridingly evident in these texts is the degree to which their readings remain dependent upon Bernard Smith's work, particularly his later book *Australian Painting*.

A difficulty always exists in locating an historian's practice in relation to the process of artistic production. Smith's is the product of understanding basic impulses derived from the debates and practices within Australian culture in the late 1930s and early 1940s. The priorities of that historical moment have been reified in his art historical methodology. His model established a way of looking at and evaluating Australian art in terms of its dependency upon European, and English or American work. While it remains indisputable that Smith's construction of a history within a dependent framework expanded our ways of understanding Australian art, the inhibiting power of the interpretation has become especially evident, for example, in the work of such writers as mentioned above.

The period since the late sixties has seen a number of new factors affecting both the environment for and practice of the visual arts in this country. Traditional categories of practice have broken down and different patterns of distribution of work have emerged. With these, different concepts of practice and work appeared and debates resurfaced around questions of 'national content' and the recognition of the continuing significance of Aboriginal culture. For some, social and political issues have become inseparable from art practices; different kinds of associations and unions of artists have formed, and the trade union movement has reaffirmed a commitment to arts programs. Meanwhile, the mainstream styles of the sixties continue to exert a strong presence in the market and in the art schools. The art market boom of the sixties was overtaken, then extended into the greater role assumed by the State through funding and administrative control, as well as by the increasing corporate presence in the arts. International surveys of contemporary art have been held with some regularity and more concerted efforts have been made to promote Australian art overseas; national and state collections have expanded and

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broadened the scope of their purchasing; and, not least, a boom continues in Australian art publications.

Despite the wealth of publications on Australian art over recent times, much that has been written devalues the specificity of its subject. Our argument sets out to analyse this process of cultural devaluation which must appear as a central issue in any reassessment of value in Australian art or culture. We have not sought simple or single explanations. The essay focuses on the concept of value through areas of conflict in Australian art, where contradictions seem more blatant, and offer glimpses of other explanations, other interpretations.

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