

Australia, Royal Academy – exhibition review

Brian Sewell, 19 September 2013

The Royal Academy's autumn exhibition this year is devoted to Australia. Both were creatures of the Enlightenment — the Academy founded in 1768 to put the fine arts on an intellectual par with the mathematics, astronomy, sciences and natural history of the day, Australia claimed in 1770 by Captain Cook with, on board his ship, Sir Joseph Banks, the pioneering naturalist who was soon to be President of the Royal Society. Alas, the greatest opportunity for a scientist to investigate the origins of human society was lost, the spirit of the Enlightenment hideously betrayed. No one realised that Englishmen were the first humans to tread on this vast island since the Aborigines had arrived (whence? I wonder) some 50,000 years before. No one was scientifically curious enough to see that these indigenous people offered in their unblemished Stone Age state an unparalleled opportunity for insights into the origins of man as a mystical, myth-making, music-making, artefact-decorating animal. They discovered congregations of people isolated from each other in this vast and inhospitable land, each of which, in language and artefact, threw a different light on their common heritage, all caught in a time-warp of pre-history that ante-dated Genesis, and yet this extraordinary, amazing, wonderful resource of human archaeology they wantonly destroyed. Putting a man on Mars or the Moon is not a jot or tittle as important as was our landing on Australia.

It was the beginning of Australia's end. For a quarter of a century the colonists were content with their foothold in New South Wales but in 1813 the great expeditions began and external influences spread; in their wake came missionaries, always the most dangerous and destructive of invaders, who, allied with the new landowners, asserted that the Aborigines were no better than dogs and that no harm could be done in shooting them and "manuring the ground with their carcasses". In such voices we hear an echo of the white American pitched against the native Indian and of the Boer against the kaffir.



Almost entirely neglected: Russell Drysdale's The Drover's Wife, c.1945

The exhibition is divided into five sections, of which the first is Aboriginal Art — but of the present, not the distant past, at last “recognised as art, not artefact”. By whom, I wonder? For these examples of contemporary aboriginal work are so obviously the stale rejiggings of a half-remembered heritage wrecked by the European alcohol, religion and servitude that have rendered purposeless all relics of their ancient and mysterious past. Swamped by Western influences, corrupted by a commercial art market as exploitative as any in Europe and America, all energy, purpose and authenticity lost, the modern Aboriginal Australian is not to be blamed for taking advantage of the white man now with imitative decoration and the souvenir. The black exploits the white's obsession with conspicuous display and plays on the corporate guilt that he has now been taught to feel for the ethnic cleansing of the 19th century — a small revenge for the devastation of his culture — but the Aborigine offers only a reinvented past, his adoption of “whitefella” materials

and, occasionally, “whitefella” ideas (Jackson Pollock must surely lie behind the longest of these canvases) undoing his “blackfella” integrity.

‘In all directions stretches the Great Australian Emptiness, in which the mind is the least of possessions’ Patrick White, 1968

The exhibition’s second section deals with Landscape and the Colonial Encounter. It is the stuff of topography and historical record, the work of prisoners, of second-rate visiting painters from England, and of immigrants from Germany and Switzerland, all of whom brought and applied inherited ways of seeing — the influence of Turner’s Romanticism and the landscape schools of Barbizon and its bastards much in evidence. Most of this material conforms to the conventions of topographical responsibility and many of the views could be by anyone and, indeed, of anywhere vaguely exotic — by Johann Moritz Rugendas, for example, far away in South America; nothing of the grandeur and sublimity that evolved in the paintings by their contemporaries in North America is to be found in this pedestrian material.

‘Above our artists looms the intimidating mass of Anglo-Saxon culture. Such a situation inevitably produces the characteristic Australian cultural cringe’ Arthur Angell Phillips, 1950

The three remaining sections deal with the rather more painterly expression of Australian landscape between 1880 and 1920 and the more stylised mannerisms of the 1920-1950 generation, ending with what the catalogue dubs Elizabethan Post-Colonial art from 1950 to the present day. All demonstrate the cultural cringe to European influences, but the levels of competence and imagination among what used to be called Australian Impressionists is far greater than among their topographical predecessors. There is still a topographical — even a narrative — element, and they are far from Impressionist, but some would not look out of place in the New English Art Club (then, as Sickert put it in 1910, setting the standard for painting in England) or among the Glasgow boys, or on the very edge of Camden Town.

Painting between 1920 and 1950, as represented here, is exactly that, and so typical is it of its time that we might not even recognise it as Australian — English, Canadian and American all seem possibilities. This exhibition is, however, not encyclopaedic and inclusive but a sweeping survey — so sweeping that it denies the undisciplined turmoil of European influences available in Australia through books and reproductions: here are none of the Australian Surrealists, Expressionists and Picasso pasticheurs who in their hotchpotch intellectual confusion could have offered us a modicum of wry amusement. The tentative approaches to the post-war Schools of Paris and New York attempted by the final batch of painters is fatally diluted by photographers who perfectly illustrate Patrick White’s assertion that “the average Australian practises the hateful religion of ordinariness”.



Death of a dream: Frederick McCubbin’s three-canvas The Pioneer, 1904 — so close to the Glasgow Boys

What on earth does the National Gallery of Australia — provider of half the exhibits and almost all the catalogue text — hope to achieve with this inadequate exhibition? The English have no romantic engagement with Australia that justifies our having to inspect such consistently provincial trivia, and though we may be amused to see the Australian Cultural Cringe so compellingly demonstrated, the demonstration (as with Australian humour) wears thin with repetition. I can see the point of an exhibition of pre-colonial Aboriginal artefacts, for it might be as provocative and illuminating as the recent investigation of the Ice Age at the British Museum (how about a show comparing them with the survivals from the earliest sites of civilisation in the Americas, Africa and Asia?). I willingly argue that we need to be reminded of the few Australian painters who achieved international fame in the mid-20th century — Boyd, Tucker, Drysdale, Perceval and Nolan among them (though Nolan was as much English in later life and, in death, posthumously became an Irishman) — yet these are almost entirely neglected here. The Royal Academy's exhibition, in the end, amounts to nothing but sad Reader's Digest stuff.

A desert of new ideas - more of indisputable truth by a fearless British art critic Waldemar Januszczak



Waldemar Januszczak. *Photo: Michael Lallo*

Full article: http://www.thesundaytimes.co.uk/sto/culture/arts/Visual_Arts/article1315292.ece

Hanging in a post-colonial disconnect

Nicolas Rothwell *The Australian* December 06, 2013



The Royal Academy of Art exhibition, Australia, a mix of Indigenous and Western works, has drawn strong responses from British critics. Source: Supplied

THE doors of the Royal Academy in London close for good this weekend on *Australia*, a continent-scale retrospective of art and images, the most ambitious international exhibition of its kind in a half-century: fine works, indigenous and Western, colonial and contemporary, more than 200 of them, drawn in large part from the holdings of the National Gallery in Canberra. A rich mirror of the nation's initial convictions and present imaginings - a grand venture that both local and British critics saw fit to tear to shreds.

As *Australia* recedes into the tranquil obscurity that enfolds all such blockbuster exhibitions once their day is done, it is this reception that lingers. Specialist writers in Sydney and Melbourne may have taken issue with the selection of works chosen for the show, and with the assumptions embodied in the hang, and done so fiercely, but it was the savagery of the English reviewers and their marked hostility to Aboriginal artworks that stood out: no large-scale national survey exhibition of this kind in a frontline London public gallery has attracted quite such a contemptuous critical response in recent years.

This was not always the pattern. The triumphant Recent Australian Painting show staged at the Whitechapel Gallery in 1961 by Bryan Robertson launched the European careers of Brett Whiteley and Jeffrey Smart, and strengthened the international profiles of Sidney Nolan, Russell Drysdale and Arthur Boyd. A more narrowly targeted exhibition of contemporary Australian art in 1982 and a bicentennial show of the Angry Penguins group at the Hayward Gallery in 1988 were both enthusiastically received.

What has changed? Clearly something in the critical climate rather than the art. London is no longer the old colonial metropolis but it is the undisputed international capital of contemporary art-making. The bar is thus set very high, and historical ties of sympathy and affinity carry little weight. The capital is the home now not just of Tate Modern, White Cube, Saatchi and Gagosian but of a hundred other modish galleries and spaces. Presentations of new trends and movements must compete in a bright arena, closely observed.

The curator of *Australia*, Kathleen Soriano, designed her exhibition with its indigenous component front and centre. This was to be its novel element, its distinctive calling card. Hence the special scrutiny: sharp and unsentimental, perhaps the first sustained critical assessment of a large body of modern Aboriginal art by reviewers speaking their mind, free from concern for the political and cultural proprieties of contemporary Australia. Several of these ex cathedra pronouncements have been recycled in excerpt in the Australian media, treated with bitter outrage and dismissed. It may be, though, that their arguments deserve a degree of attention: they highlight the difficulties that lie ahead in the ongoing campaign to find markets for indigenous art overseas.

Here's the view of Waldemar Januszczak, London's best-known high-end art critic, the voice of judgment of *The Sunday Times*, an author and filmmaker with a broad international reach: he found the selection of indigenous works on display both "problematic" and "tokenistic". From the great tradition of Aboriginal creativity inspired by the overwhelming natural landscape of the continent, the Australian art world, he felt, had "managed to create what amounts to a market in decorative rugs". Thus "opening the show with a selection of these spotty meanderings, and discussing them in dramatically hallowed terms, cannot disguise the fact that in most cases the great art of the Aborigines has been turned into tourist tat". Januszczak's response may have been given added focus by the strong contrast between the handful of old, majestically patinated mid-century bark paintings from north Arnhem Land included in the exhibition and the much more polished contemporary large-scale barks and desert acrylics that filled the opening gallery. But his chief targets were the quality of fad and fashion he discerned in the more recent indigenous pieces on view, and the complete absence of critical matrix to assess the work. A certain idea of Australia and the unfolding of its cultural story underpinned his critique.

A similar theory lurked in the review offered by Adrian Hamilton, of *The Independent*, who admired the initial salvo of indigenous works while finding their meanings elusive but who felt the prominence being given to Aboriginal art today reflected the pattern of the past, and repressed guilts coming to the fore: "There is no doubt an element of penance in the way that Australia has elevated Aboriginal art in the last 20 years. The treatment by the settlers of the indigenous population has been truly horrendous, including enforced castration, bounty hunting and enforced separation of children from parents. It was not until 1967 that a referendum allowed them citizenship as of right.

"The attempt to make up for past sins by ennobling their culture has led to some spectacular frauds, in which false art has been sold as true native expression to a gullible public. Nor can you divorce professional tutelage and art gallery taste from works produced for a Western market. The search for the 'authentic' in native art is always a perilous business." A harsh perspective, and so things can go when the long record of a nation's history is viewed with a little knowledge by distant eyes.

But it is again a sense of the slightly confected, managed, colonial quality of the indigenous art current that comes through, and this theme reaches its crescendo in the most notorious, and most requoted, London media review of *Australia*, that written by octogenarian controversialist Brian Sewell in *The Evening Standard*. Here he is, in full flight, weighing the exhibition's new indigenous works in the balance: "These examples are so obviously the stale rejiggings of a half-remembered heritage wrecked by the European alcohol, religion and servitude that have rendered purposeless all relics of their ancient and mysterious past. Swamped by Western influences, corrupted by a commercial art market as exploitative as any in Europe and America, all energy, purpose and authenticity lost, the modern Aboriginal Australian is not to be blamed for taking advantage of the white man now with imitative decoration and the souvenir. The black exploits the white's obsession with conspicuous display and plays on the corporate guilt that he has now been taught to feel for the ethnic cleansing of the 19th century."

Well! This is candour, and assessment, in words of fire...