

The Wholeness of the Field

Just as well no-one ever asks me about the 'avant-garde' – I could not utter a vague comment about it. This is the Sixties and my field is commercial art which depends entirely on making ordinary products look as desirable as they possibly can. I've never taken the slightest interest in the Australian art scene and it will be a few decades before I realise there even is one – and growing rapidly. From a few pockets of activity across all art forms in 1968, in two decades there will be thirty thousand or more artists across Australia and the arts overall will grow into a billion-dollar-a-year industry employing as many people as work in mining and agriculture.

But I'm in Coburg pressing my shirt for the design department of a flex-pack factory, so even if the artworld is tiny, it doesn't interest me at all. Yet right under my nose something is about to happen that will change our culture forever. Australian art is getting ready for a new unprecedented phase launched from a platform of thousands of square metres of flat geometry called *Hard Edge* or *Colour Field Painting*. This is a very exciting time for the budding scene as it tosses out the Antipodean ideals and ushers in a brand-new international flavour. I do not see it happen. As the sun rises on this new Australian era I'm on the train heading to Fawkner to apply a little more of my skill in four colour line and halftone.

If I was a different Robert, another art student – perhaps growing up in Melbourne – I might have taken the Fine Art course. Then this other Robert might join forces with other like-minded students and work on their future together. And this other Robert would visit *Gallery A* in South Yarra that has its own modern art classes run by Janet Dawson. He'd go to *Strines* in Carlton – and the *Argus Gallery*, an important rental space at the old Argus newspaper building in Latrobe Street. He would know of the artists in their forties like Brack, Blackman and Boyd and of the new younger set like Whiteley and George Baldessin. And he would be told of a local boy named Clement Meadmore who left for New York the year we start art school. Meadmore's, great big twisty beams of weather-patinated steel in public spaces will eventually be all over the civilised world including Melbourne. But this year he is one of the first to alert Australians to the latest in American art.

In 1965 he writes an essay for *Art and Australia* which this other Robert would surely read. He talks about the *New York Scene*, to convey some of the directions and attitudes prevailing in New York. And in March 1966 when I am in my last year of art school, he writes about 'single-colour fields' and "the wholeness of the field" in relation to the paintings of Barnett Newman. He is articulating what is deemed a revolutionary movement that the New York critic Clement Greenberg calls "Post-Painterly Abstraction". In the USA Barnett Newman is one of the first to work in this way, producing flat and evenly handled surfaces as early as 1950.

And sixteen thousand kilometres away, this other Robert would be aware of it all. He'd buy *Artforum* which devotes just about every page to the American Avant-garde. In the absence of the real thing, this most prestigious art magazine would give him a model for the latest abstract styles. In 1965, he would see Paul Partos' exhibition at *Gallery A* that is run by James Mollison and the following year he

would visit Sydney Ball's show at the *South Yarra Gallery*. Ball has just come back from New York and is one of the few to have first-hand experience of new American art. In *Art and Australia*, another Robert would read that Ball's *show revealed a lack of direct impact in this country of recent American Painting*.

But that situation is soon rectified. The following year a major show arrives from America: *Two Decades of American Painting*. What a great spectacle for this other Robert to witness! Seen first at the National Gallery of Victoria in Swanston Street, the blockbuster's more recent works reflect the new colour-field movement and in *Art and Australia*, Chris Wallace-Crabbe writes that the show *has the effect of presenting Australians with certain conceptual challenges in an unusually acute form* – which probably means that the public are unexpectedly slapped across the face with the Avant-garde. Some interested parties feel the sting and are not impressed with what they perceive to be blatant self-indulgence at the very least. But the voices of the most authoritative art figures come to the fore. Daniel Thomas, Ron Millar and Patrick McCaughey are very enthusiastic about the show. McCaughey writes in *The Age: Once again Melbourne has been dragged screaming into the twentieth century*. For him they are paintings in the grand manner of the world's art history, offering *a new recognition of what is the art of our times*. All of this another Robert would witness. But not this one.

4

Australian art is taking a new course. It takes a sharp right-angled turn as it rushes to embrace a brand new situation: other interested parties have taken on the management of it. In Melbourne, Patrick McCaughey has emerged as a prominent navigator for the new art scene, both as a commentator in his role as *The Age* art critic and as a theorist when he becomes the new editor of the *C.A.S. Broadsheet*.

Good exhibitions emanating from Melbourne artists have an unrelatedness which is quixotic, he writes in 1967, which is to say, the best artists in my view lack organisation. He is about to rectify that and like Greenberg in the USA whom McCaughey knows personally, he is building a reputation as a shaping force for Australian art. He is assisted by a number of other commentators – Elwyn Lynn and Donald Brook among them – and by particular galleries such as Pinacotheca and Tolarno in Melbourne which opened around the time I moved from Anglesea to Melbourne and began looking for a job.

The artists these new galleries are interested in are the ones experimenting with flat field and minimal abstraction, so a whole generation of figurative artists are going out of favour. Another Robert might tell us that the National Gallery School under John Brack is suddenly the 'old style' and that many student followers of the local figurative scene are being marginalised. The anti-abstract Antipodeans are being relegated to, well, the artworld antipodes. It is as pointless now as it will be in the future for any artist to object to the endorsed directions for current art practice. Artists are in or they are out and very few will manage to survive long enough to see figuration come back into fashion.

Support or not to support, that is the question. The few who set up galleries with a commitment to particular young artists are invaluable, but even so, they choose which artists they want to encourage

according to their own perceived idea of the best practice. If some young artists are not part of this scene they just disappear into their own landscapes. To avoid this, some like Paul Partos and Robert Rooney move rapidly from figuration to abstraction. Later, when times change, artists like Booth and Hickey move back again. In a matter of just a few years the great force of American art has blasted the Australian imagination out of the millpond, turning the art mood at the top end towards ever-smoother canvases and 3D razor-sharp wood, plastic and metal. And almost overnight, the mantle of arts management is taken up by critics, curators and dealers. And another Robert would see it all.

No one knows it, but in two generations, emerging artists will be light years away from Bohemia, where artists wait to be 'discovered'. Artists and educators are fast learners and in the future no-one will pretend to depart radically from the right direction for art. In thirty years they will be thoroughly conversant with the industry even before their first show. They will study Arts Business Practice, Context and Culture and Contemporary Theory. They will be media-savvy; they will know about networking and self-promotion; they will know who the industry leaders are and where the funding comes from. They will know, by the radical changes that artists made in the decade following the American influence, that artists can *adopt* a position in relation to the industry; that just like the critics and curators, they too are "arts professionals". If artists of note make art that has a particular look about it, a look that can be recognised even before anyone actually sees the work, young graduates will know that it is driven by forces external to it, forces theoretical, institutional and of the marketplace. And long after the sixties has gone the art scene will morph into the art industry, an employer of tens of thousands who are not artists.

Robert Hollingworth Extract from *Nature Boy 2004*