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CHAPTER 1

The Bicentenary and the BLOCKbuster, 1988

This typically punchy address was first delivered by Joan Kerr at Artists’ Week at the Adelaide Festival in 1988. It was the kind of essay at which she excelled, combining her pithy witticisms, with thorough analysis. Here, in a discussion of art exhibitions held around Australia to celebrate the Bicentenary of white settlement, Kerr argued on behalf of the unusual, not the predictable, and for the outsider and not the mainstream.

When Carol Duncan, the American feminist art historian, was in Sydney in 1986 she said it had been easy to suggest alternatives to the official American Bicentennial celebrations in 1976 since they had left out women, American Indians, blacks, the everyday and the underprivileged. Someone (I think it was Julie Ewington) pointed out that these were precisely the groups which appeared to be the major targets for visibility in the Australian Bicentenary; that to think up a project on underprivileged black women was then considered almost a guarantee of an Australian Bicentennial Authority grant, although any project also had to be acceptable to government bureaucrats and therefore absolutely inoffensive and apolitical. How did one respond to that? ‘You’ve got problems’, Duncan replied.

Art exhibitions are, of course, doubly difficult if you are interested in such neglected aspects of our past. Historic images of underprivileged black women, to continue with this extreme example (which has not, as far as I know, been funded in the official bicentennial exhibition program), prove thin on the ground, although a few can be discovered in the so-called minor arts: newspaper prints, photographs and some modest watercolour sketches. Historic images by such groups however, are virtually non-existent. Spectacular original artworks such as large oil paintings are obviously the most favoured exhibits for public gallery spaces because of

their impact, yet these are, by definition, signs of privilege. As a result, the “redress” side of the bicentennial Bicentenary, as far as art is concerned, tends to have faded away as curator after curator opts for visual appeal, for the accepted ‘masterpiece’ in preference to meaningful subject matter.

Art already established in art museums will naturally win almost every time over the ideologically sound newspaper print, fragile watercolour, tiny photograph or grubby plan. As Daniel Thomas, curator of The Great Australian Art Exhibition (subsequently renamed Creating Australia), commented when I suggested that a large watercolour depicting the European settlers’ first official dinner given for the Adelaide Aborigines in 1838 should be included in his exhibition—a watercolour moreover, by a woman, Martha Berkeley—‘But, Joan, it’s a ruin’. That condition is hardly surprising. Colonial watercolours by women have normally been neglected physically as well as aesthetically; all we can normally now do is accept the condition of such works as part of their history. Berkley’s detailed, self-conscious, history painting Art Gallery of South Australia (AGSA) is still a major (ruined) work. Yet, instead, we are being shown her charming (pristine) miniature of Mrs Andrews playing the harp (c. 1840, recently bequeathed to the AGSA), a work which in this context reaffirms that women’s art has always been minor.

On the whole, The Great Australian Art Exhibition, hosted by the Art Gallery of South Australia (to which I confess, I have contributed a catalogue entry on a painting by a male artist, Augustus Earle) appears to have decided to have its ideologically sound cake and eat it too, an approach which is, of course, characteristic of the whole Australian Bicentenary.
Just as many speakers, artists and academics (including me) are cheerfully contributing to both bicentennial and anti-bicentennial events, so Daniel Thomas and Ron Radford have managed to combine two quite oppositional exhibitions into this one. Overall, the exhibition contains about 300 works encompassing almost everything: paintings by women and Aborigines, photographs, decorative arts, images with socially uplifting themes, prints of unusual, challenging subjects, and lots and lots of opulence, prettiness and power. There is something for almost everyone here.

Then, from amongst these 300 exhibits, Messrs Thomas and Radford have selected 57 for star treatment. They are most conservative and elitist—93 per cent are by men; most are large paintings. Five works by Aboriginal (male) artists have achieved stardom, Aboriginal art having become a subject about which no Australian art professional can any longer confess ignorance and retain credibility.

No works by nineteenth-century women have been accepted into the ‘masterpiece’ category, so since the stated reason for featuring these 57 ‘key works’ and their specially-commissioned essays written by experts throughout Australia is to change public consciousness, deliberately to create icons for Australian art, The Great Australian Art Exhibition will obviously only be successful if we all go away from it firmly convinced that the significant founders of Australian art were all men. Four women only (Grace Cossington Smith, Margaret Preston, Ethel Spowers and Margaret Dodd) have been included in the 25 key works representing the twentieth century, a token gesture which simply confirms the general irrelevance of women artists up to and for the present.

This attitude to our past is, of course, hardly exceptional. For instance, although Daniel Thomas—like Bernard Smith and Humphrey McQueen—is normally quite unusually sensitive to the significance of women artists within recent Australian art (both McQueen and Thomas have published monographs on individual women painters), when it comes to a general historical framework all accept the standard, overwhelmingly masculine, definition. McQueen’s latest publication, Suburbs of the sacred (already nicknamed ‘Keith Looby, life, the universe and everything’) is quite astonishing in its claustrophobic maleness: like a bucks’ party to which a couple of women critics, Memory Holloway and Gertrude Langer, have alone been invited—the former as Looby groupie, the latter as the wicked fairy godmother. No woman painter seems ever to have impinged on Looby’s consciousness. Even his wives achieved no real existence except as they affected his psyche.

On a larger scale, an equally overwhelmingly male story of Australian art has been just as arbitrarily constructed over the years as the history of Australian art. With a similar fate in the possibility of one true story, the powerbrokers of Australian art in 1988 offer personal selections disguised as a universally valid, national visual identity. As one result, in The Great Australian Art Exhibition the host institution (AGSA) just happens to own the largest number of Australian art’s ‘key works’; 12 of the 57 major works are from its collections. The Australian National Gallery (ANG) is runner-up with nine; the National Gallery of Victoria (NGV) has eight and the Art Gallery of New South Wales (AGNSW) has six. The Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery (TMA) and the Art Gallery of Western Australia (AGWA) have two; Queensland Art Gallery (QAG) has three. Alan Bond and Holmes à Court, like the Mitchell and La Trobe Libraries, have one each.

Daniel Thomas and Ron Radford are, naturally, genuinely convinced that the AGSA owns more Australian art masterpieces than any place else in the world, and there are, of course, obvious practical reasons why the
host gallery should prefer its own works. Nevertheless, as a Sydneysider, I tend to feel that an exhibition dedicated to promoting artistic values and making icons needs more argued, historically-based justification than we get in this spectacular show. Instead, this exhibition is basically about beautiful images, boosted by impeccable scholarship (Thomason is a most exigent editor), resulting in an outstandingly glamorous gathering for the birthday party. The guests however, do seem irritatingly exclusive when one happens to be amongst the uninvited.

Predictably enough, Melbourne and Sydney dominate the scene geographically; yet South Australia and the Northern Territory have been given exceptional—and quite justified—visibility in this show. Other states, unfortunately, fare less well. Those two 'icon' images from the AGWA, for instance, were painted in Arnhem Land and Box Hill respectively. Western Australian art is represented by Charlie Numblar’s bark painting alone among the icons (from the AGSA), while two paintings, a screenprint and a whalebone chair (all by men) are Western Australian’s contribution to the remaining 243. Like Queensland, Western Australia has therefore been constructed as of little national interest either as a collection of significant images or as a centre of artistic production. It is much the same old European story of Australian Art, despite the shift in emphasis to South Australia; the notable difference in this exhibition is its exceptional emphasis on the Aboriginal contribution to Creating Australia.

There are, of course, alternatives to this sort of institutional ‘masterpiece’ approach to Australian art, other possible constructions of heritage. The Mitchell Library’s The Coming of the Strangers exhibition (which will be hanging throughout 1988) stuck with early bicentennial ideological purity almost to the last. Its curator, Baiba Berzins, the former Mitchell Librarian who resigned only a few weeks before the exhibition opened, was determined to present all faces of the coming of the Europeans to Australia: Aborigines, women, convicts, poor and rich, the controlled as well as the controllers in the first 30 years of white settlement.

Her aim, unfortunately, went sadly against the grain of the Mitchell Library’s own strengths. If any archive represents colonial power and status, the Mitchell is it. Donations over the years have almost invariably come from the upper-middle classes, the only section of the population conscious of the value of preserving selected fragments of oneself for posterity. The Coming of the Strangers was therefore forced to represent convict and working-class life by very few images with very little visual impact, the most extreme example of this being a black and white print about an inch high in which one may dimly discern a woman hanging out the washing, an activity, the caption superfluously informs us, is rarely depicted in early colonial art. (‘Dimly’ is certainly the mot juste for this exhibition, it is so dark that a torch is a recommended accessory if you wish to identify certain works.)

The exhibition organisers at the State Library of New South Wales clearly became unhappy about the modesty of the works selected and in compensation had the new galleries so overdesigned that the setting totally swamps the exhibits. Flags flying on a symbolic bridge at the exhibition’s entrance note the birth of Jane Austen and similarly momentous world events; light boxes and gigantic blow-ups of small prints and watercolours completely overshadow the originals; fake prison gates and bars disastrously substitute for the absence of original convict imagery. Everything is framed with postmodern motifs, colours and holes in walls; I’ve never seen such an aggressive display. Even the Mitchell’s
wonderful 1820s collector’s chest is explained only by recorded bird calls, funding to solve its problems of date, designer and provenance having formed no part of its recent restoration program. Everywhere the Library has opted for ‘atmosphere’ instead of information, in the misguided belief that this will capture passing footfallers and other illiterates normally intimidated by libraries.

Underestimating the intelligence of one’s public does nothing for the Library’s collections (nor, by all accounts, for attendance figures). One comes away with the impression that the State Library of NSW owns only a tiny collection of old tat and therefore has had to spend thousands of dollars disguising this unpalatable fact. Nothing could, of course, be further from the truth; the Mitchell and Dixson Libraries own the world’s greatest Australiana collections. Unfortunately, most of these glories were too late in date, too genteel for this show or have been destroyed by ‘design’ and darkness.

Some of the Mitchell’s visual treasures could be seen across the Domain in March—April in The Artist and the Patron exhibition at the AGNSW, a far more visually sophisticated, if socially unsound, state bicentennial offering. It showed us what NSW colonials actually painted and owned, not what we wish they had made and collected. There were problems in this approach too; the result (deliberately) reeked of the genteel drawing room, and perhaps the visitor needed more guidance through the thematic exhibition than was provided by the outstandingly comprehensive catalogue. It was nevertheless glaringly obvious that the curator, Patricia R. McDonnell, the designer
Rosemary Peel and the staff of the state art gallery knew far more about constructing an exhibition than state librarians and their designers did. The Artist and the Patron had the sense to flaunt its original works, including some from private collections which were rather moth-eaten and foxed, such as Louisa Atkinson's splendid watercolour possom of c. 1860 (owned by the National Trust, NSW). Paintings were simply hung in original frames on plain walls in rooms of Regency and Early Victorian proportions, providing an appropriate, yet unobtrusive domestic scale suggestive of their original context.

The artist Richard Dunn commented on the opening night that The Artist and the Patron reminded him of the American colonial rooms in the Metropolitan Museum in New York, except that this exhibition made our colonial heritage seem more attractive, varied and proudly displayed than the Met's. As was inevitable, the exhibition implied that NSW's past was gentrified, tasteful and narcisistic, obsessed with property and portraits and lacking any consciousness of convicts, workers, aggressive or non-conformist Aborigines, ugliness, poverty and other social problems (as I pointed out in my introductory catalogue essay). That was, understandably, the only sort of imaginary artistic world patrons would pay for; most of the colony's inhabitants played no role in it. We do not learn what the past was like from such images, but we can get a good idea of how upper-class and nouveaux riches settlers wished to be recorded for posterity. The great strength of this exhibition was that it revealed local glories hitherto almost unknown: the popularity, range and competence of colonial portraiture, for example. Like Western Australia's similar show in 1982, The Artist and the Patron put local colonial art back into our history as far more than an insignificant predecessor of the Heidelberg School.

It is irresistible to compare Tasmanian Vision (held at the TMAG in Hobart and the QVMAG in Launceston earlier this year) with The Artist and the Patron, although both were, in fact, very different exhibitions. Their differences have been expressed mainly through arguing about their respective hungs, a topic which sounds boringly introspective but which actually proves quite revealing. The Tasmanian Vision pictures were hung in rough chronological order, except that all items by the same artist were grouped together around the date of his (occasionally her) earliest work. The effect was overwhelmingly confirmatory of the status quo: a bank of John Glover's overwhelmingly confident, large visionary oils following on after a few precursors, and so on. A large number of Benjamin Duterrau’s works, concentrating on images connected with the great 'National Picture' the artist was never to paint, were contextualised in Launceston by other Aboriginal images, but even here the 'masterwork' approach remained dominant. Altogether the exhibition served to confirm the superiority of Tasmania's artistic achievements within the Australian colonies in the early part of the nineteenth century, and this 'masterpiece' approach was certainly immensely popular.

The Artist and the Patron on the other hand, offered a glimpse of the whole range of art available in New South Wales at the time: history paintings (very few), landscapes by Conrad Martens and by unknown amateurs, both equally glorifying a specific place; large oils, tiny naïve prints, pretentious portraits, crude caricatures, etc. This exhibition therefore allowed the viewer more room for social analysis, more space to question the quality and quantity of local patronage than Tasmania's far more worshipful attitude to artistic genius did, although it must be admitted that certain critics (Elwyn Lynn) felt that social revelations and thematic groupings were a poor—and threatening—substitute for aesthetic formalism.

The Bicentenary and the BLOCKbuster, 1988