

Strained Elegy

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Barry Dickins

BLACK + WHITELEY:

BARRY DICKINS IN SEARCH OF BRETT

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THERE HAVE BEEN two 'biographies' of Brett Whiteley since his death in 1992: the 'unauthorised' account by Graeme Blundell and Margot Hilton, and a 'memoir' by Whiteley's sister, Frannie Hopkirk. Neither book satisfactorily plugged the holes in the Whiteley myth, and each had its limitations. *Black + Whiteley*, Barry Dickins's contribution to this literature, has a vastly different agenda. 'Plugging holes' is the least of Dickins's concerns as he embarks on his curious, freewheeling journey 'in search of Brett'.

Black + Whiteley has the quality of a slightly strained elegy; it celebrates the best of Whiteley's work, and laments the artist's deterioration: his descent from '[g]enius to wastrel'. But it does not set out to itemise every detail or to fix Whiteley to the irremediable facts of his own life and death. In fact, it does precisely the opposite. 'I have got him, I think, alive again,' Dickins writes in his acknowledgments. 'Getting Whiteley alive' is Dickins's main intent. He endeavours to do so by creating an impressionistic sense of the artist, gleaned from anecdotes, conversations and personal observations (both relevant and irrelevant). But, despite Dickins's literary skills, Whiteley remains a distant and imperious entity.

Dickins is a confident lyricist: poetic musings abound, as do innovative lapses in punctuation and confoundingly abstract sentence constructions. This may be a valid attempt to enliven staid biographical conventions, but it doesn't help to delineate the figure of Whiteley for us. Pruned back, these passages might have stronger descriptive power. As it is, Dickins does not rein in his inclination to poeticise, and the result makes for tedious reading at times, and a book that cloaks more than it evokes. Most importantly, the impression Dickins intended to correct perseveres: namely that, despite the odd instance of spontaneous generosity, Brett Whiteley was vain, egocentric and insensitive to the needs and feelings of others.

The craggy, all-demolishing self-confidence is evident from the front cover pic (the only pic in the book), which features Whiteley looking impossibly boyish in that weathered way of his; his Harpo Marx-like mop of hair set off by the deep grooves of consternation etched into his forehead. Hands behind head, short-sleeved, T-shirted, muscular arms lifted to reveal matching biceps — he emanates that self-possessed (and self-professed) beauty for which he was famous.

Dickins is not uncritical of the art or the man, and he makes no bones about Whiteley's vanity: 'Whiteley, being

so vain, has artistic sympathy only for beautiful objects like himself.' But we can't quite gauge how Dickins feels about the self-congratulatory aspect of Whiteley's personality. He seems to accept it without judgment, neither apologising for it nor seeking to explain it beyond some vague allusion to 'insecurity'. Still, the reader is curious to examine the psychology behind Whiteley's narcissism. How, for instance, should we respond to his claim that he employed other people to read to him because his eyes were 'too beautiful' to waste on such pursuits? One hopes Whiteley was having a joke at his own expense, but was his a personality capable of self-mockery? How far did Whiteley believe in his own persona?

The charisma Brett Whiteley exuded was undoubtedly real. As Dickins illustrates in various excited passages, Whiteley was immensely charming. People were captivated not only by his good looks and quicksilver conversation, but by the elegance and swagger he and Wendy brought to the art world. He was a 'tabloid synonym for decadence'. He was also, at his best, a singular artist. What remains paradoxical is that such an assured artist was so dependent on the praise of others. Dickins gives us examples of Whiteley requiring, from his proselytes, a level of admiration that bordered on sycophancy. Such behaviour suggests that his self-belief was not inviolable. But, if some chink in his armour led to addiction in the first place, addiction itself fed a more debilitating fear (and one that has dogged many an addictive artist): that he would not be able to produce good art without drugs; that 'the art would dry up if he dried out'.

The opportunity to dispel the myth of Whiteley as some kind of fundamentally flawed Sun God lies here, in an examination of his drug addiction. Dickins has not pulled his punches. He follows his subject into the sordor of it. But a little clinical distance might have helped to ground his observations. We get little cool, considered discussion of Whiteley's drug problems — verbal gymnastics obscure the issue. All is hot, speedy, abstract, couched in gritty, street-wise prose, which gives the text filmic atmosphere without quite stripping away the romance.

Sometimes speaking simply gets the point across best. When Dickins moves into journalistic mode, interviewing those who knew Whiteley, and evocatively describing places, people, feelings and gestures, his style becomes more purposeful. In his encounter with Marie Santry, Whiteley's largely unacknowledged muse, the reader gets an important background picture of Whiteley's 'bowerbird' approach to art. These encounters lend a logic to the book that is otherwise absent, and give it a more definitive shape.

Dickins's style would be more palatable in a different kind of book, an autobiography or series of essays, where poetic licence might feel more appropriate. While there's no harm in a biographer revealing his or her processes, contextualising or even personalising the material, in *Black + Whiteley* there is too much Barry Dickins on show. One feels that Dickins is straining his own art in an attempt to elucidate another's and, in doing so, loses track of his prime responsibility: his subject.