

Shearing the Classes

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Terry Smith

TRANSFORMATIONS IN AUSTRALIAN ART

Volume One: The Nineteenth Century —

Landscape, Colony and Nation

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Volume Two: The Twentieth Century —

Modernism and Aboriginality

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TERRY SMITH, as a writer and teacher, has made a considerable mark on Australian art history. Two volumes of his revised essays, organised to form a chronology, have now been published under the title *Transformations in Australian Art*. Within the gleaming dust jackets, there are black-and-white illustrations, grey print and dry paper, an austerity the text confirms. More than two-thirds is extended questions and theoretical ruminations; less than one-third addresses works of art and the detail of their origins. Smith's labyrinthine, strangely equivocal style of writing is unduly punishing on the reader, yet the content is often worth the effort of disentangling the author's meaning.

The writing of art history in Australia has altered considerably in the forty years since Bernard Smith wrote his history of Australian painting in terms of provincial responses to an international mainstream. The subsequent period did not see the replacement of the modernist model by another that coped with the contemporary reality of diverse cultures in close interaction. Instead, art history branched out in a number of directions, and was opened to visual culture at large by Joan Kerr, Daniel Thomas and Leigh Astbury. Redress began to be made for women artists. Aboriginal contemporary art was embraced and a start made in researching past contexts. Ian Burn reconsidered nationalism in the art of the Heidelberg School and the period between the wars, and Ron Radford recently inserted the assertive Federation style of nationalism. Tim Bonyhady, writing about colonial landscapes, addressed the question of who owns the land, and moved on to an ecological point of view. Terry Smith participated in all these changes, as did most of us: a feature of the period has been the unanimity of each venture.

However, Smith at no stage has been satisfied by reforms to the base. I have shared his interest in looking closely at the circumstances of creation, but whereas I look to art/artist/social context for terms of reference, his approach is virtually the opposite. He would perceive mine as pointedly evading the conceptual superstructure; I have seen his as unduly presumptive. These eleven essays, written over more than thirty years, represent many thoughtful attempts to mix, match and transform the concepts, methods and research of (mostly other people's) scholarly work: he could be more generous

with acknowledgments. He has never lost sight of the need to develop a theory and methodology for a new art history, one that would take its stance internationally.

Grounded in Marx, his philosophy is of the 'structures' of 'social good'. Typically, art is approached via a sharp verbal image of a particular ideological conflict. The writing, in sympathy with the concept of divided ideologies, succeeds when it creates disagreement and conflict among readers and incites division between various art histories. Thus an essay about Tom Roberts's *Shearing the Rams* earned the tart rebuke that it was 'prescriptive'. Smith examines that painting in the light of industrial conflicts that coincided with its creation. Does it represent the unionisation of shearing? Clearly it does not. Nor does the image of people working harmoniously together hint that there was a pressing issue of divided loyalties. Typically, however, Smith does not truncate an interrogation merely because no signs of ideological conflict are to be seen. After devoting thousands of words to checking *Shearing the Rams* from every conceivable angle of the class division, he acknowledges a *notable absence* of anything that would lead one to suppose that conflict existed. The method is exasperating for the reader thinking about the painting's positive expression, but it serves a useful purpose in demonstrating that Roberts and the people in the shed had to be aware of posing in relation to an urgent reality. In the weeks immediately before Roberts began preparatory studies for the painting at Brocklesby Station near Corowa, thirty police were brought in to quell two hundred unionists who were attempting to disrupt shearing at Brookong Station fifty miles away.

There is a measure of misleading inference and omission in Smith's questioning style. His evidently exhaustive study of *Shearing the Rams* omits or elides more than one germane item of information. For example, the artist had a family connection with the Andersons, which permitted him to spend months at a time at Brocklesby, and which led him to a modest shearing shed rather than a larger shed further west, to hand-blades rather than mechanical shears, and to a shed full of local non-unionised farmers and sons (plus one small daughter) rather than itinerant, unionised shearers. That piece of neglected information answers two of Smith's leading questions as to why Roberts 'elects not to show the most progressive aspect of the situation' (from which Smith infers that the image was 'retrospective' rather than up-to-date) and why the image would not represent class conflict between workers and pastoralists. That said, the relevance of Smith's primary question is undeniable. One no longer looks at the painting in the old way.

The prepared mind seizes on information relevant to it. Smith, reviewing a book about the Russian collection of George Costakis in 1984, saw something I had registered only mildly the year before when visiting the Royal Academy exhibition of that collection, and seeing in the book a reproduction of a 1920s painting by Fernand Léger that Margaret Preston had rather closely copied in her kitchen *Still Life* (1927). Her habit of borrowing was not news to me: in the mid-

1970s I had come across many marginal drawings in her art library and had analysed her use of Japanese (initially) and various European and Aboriginal designs as armature for her own still life compositions. For me, the practice was a vehicle for Preston's exploratory art and had, besides, the positive value of bringing 'foreign' and Aboriginal visual languages into play within Australian culture. Smith comes from another angle. He has in mind both Ian North's observation that Preston's later 1920s, geometrical style 'aligns with Léger's work and ideas of the 1920s, the Purist ideal of a machine aesthetic, and that movement's reaffirmation of the object following decorative Cubist developments', and the explicit link Humphrey McQueen had made between Preston's article 'From Eggs to Electrolux' and the Purist concept. In 1924 Léger had written on behalf of an aesthetic that would arise not, as Preston's did, from an infinitely translatable abstract geometry but from the unstrained perception of real objects:

Every object, picture, piece of architecture, or ornamental organisation has a value in itself; it is strictly absolute and independent of anything it may happen to represent ... Men are afraid of free consideration ... Victims of a critical, sceptical and intellectual epoch, they strain themselves in the attempt to understand instead of relying upon their sensibility ... Beauty is everywhere, in the arrangement of your pots and pans, on the white wall of your kitchen, more perhaps than in your eighteenth-century salon or in the official museum.

Smith sets out to demonstrate that 'various early 1920s paintings by Léger lie, quite literally, behind all [Preston's] "geometric abstract" works of the late 1920s, and some earlier still lifes as well'. I have reservations about the detail of this chapter, starting with the notion that Preston paid deep, Harold Bloom-style, homage to Léger, and find the argument more than usually hidden, but, if I *have* grasped its meandering drift, Smith's concept has the potential to be as revolutionary for thinking about the modernist art of influence as his question about industrial action proved to be for *Shearing the Rams*. Preston is seen to act Impurely: she adopts the form of Léger's painting, successfully adapts it towards *her own kitchen*, and transforms our reading both of Léger's Purist project within the sheltered milieu of a French avant-garde and Preston's modernist and popularising role as a taste-maker in Australia.

Smith's first aim is not to perceive a work of art in its own terms (analogous to Léger's Purism, and to how a good reader endeavours to understand a text) but to test how it relates to ideological divisions. On the evidence here, he has been battering away, usually at art not directly driven by ideological motives. The approach is illuminating, especially when the light is not entirely from one side. The tools of interrogation, certain concepts of social division, are too often not themselves interrogated, whereas the works of art are. At best there is a two-way exchange whereby the presumption behind the question is in turn challenged by the work of art.