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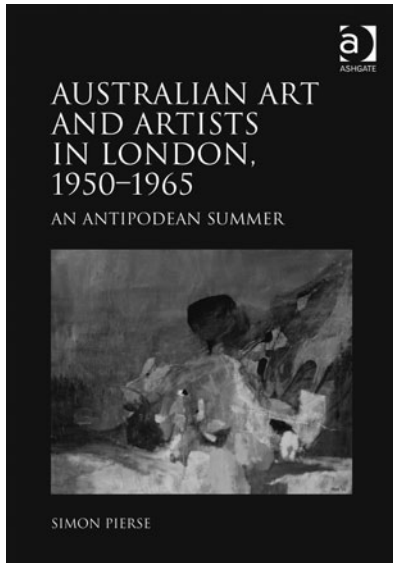
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Simon Pierse

**Australian Art and Artists in London,
1950-1965: An Antipodean Summer**

Farnham: Ashgate Publishing, 2012

Sheridan Palmer

The reception of Australian art in Britain during the post-war period is a fascinating story. From the early 1950s through to the mid-1960s, Australian artists rode an exciting wave that saw them break into the high end of British art. This Antipodean odyssey delivered success to a favoured few, namely Russell Drysdale, Sidney Nolan, the Boyd brothers, Charles Blackman, Lawrence Daws, and Brett Whiteley. Yet, for the majority of artists, success was often difficult to attain. In this book, Simon Pierse charts the connections made between the Australian newcomers and the British cultural cognoscenti, and throws light on the private and public machinations of the London art world during this period of cultural

interchange.

He begins with an overview of Sir Kenneth Clark's visit to Australia in 1949. Joseph Burke, the Herald Professor of Fine Arts at the University of Melbourne, and a protégé of Clark, referred to this gentrified art historian as '*Deus ex machina*', and during Clark's tour of duty, which included advising the National Gallery of Victoria (NGV) on their collection, lecturing, and invigorating the small Australian cultural scene, his influential hand was evident. Clark purchased paintings from Drysdale and Nolan and influenced Nolan's professional trajectory and international ambitions. His patronage of modern artists also saw the NGV acquire works by Arthur Boyd and Drysdale for the first time. In the aftermath of his mobilising visit, there was an exodus of Australians to London.

Pierse's highly informative and anecdotal narrative provides a compendium of names and vignette profiles of those who lived, worked, and studied in England. Based on extensive archival research, and making liberal use of quotes from artists' interviews and secondary sources, he passes verdicts on these artists' success. As Pierse suggests, much rested on the artist's personality; for example, Albert Tucker found the British climate miserable and the people 'mean-spirited and a daunting exclusive class system' impenetrable. Tony Underhill, who found things difficult at first, adapted and successfully established himself, as did the young 'golden couple' David and Hermia Boyd, who received critical acclaim for their ceramics and were invited to produce a large range of pottery for the 1951 Festival of Britain.

Clark's fondness for Australia may be understandable given he had left behind a dull, post-war Britain in the grips of reconstruction and rationing, but it must be

remembered that Australia was a strategic part of the Commonwealth and a valuable economic resource in Britain's post-war plans. Perhaps Clark's evangelising mission served to smooth the passage between the mother country and the 'Cinderella of its dominions'. Indeed, romancing the Antipodes as a land of opportunity for the British was achieved through art, literature, film, and also immigration, especially the 'ten pound Pom' program. As Pierse points out, 'The commonwealth was indeed a beacon of hope and a symbol of new order for the UK during the 1950s.'¹ All this bode well for the arrival of the Australians.

Australia was refreshing for Clark, with its vibrant, original modern art, 'uncontaminated by tradition', but his patronage and goodwill was a double-edged sword. Once back in London, Clark succumbed to the tyranny of distance and the handicap of colonial attitudes, and, to this elite Englishman, Australian artists remained a 'curious breed' and the Antipodes a peripheral place, disadvantaged by distance, isolation, and 'queerness'. This attitude continued in 1961 when Clark, along with the curatorial doyen of the Whitechapel Gallery, Bryan Robertson, and the ambitious and intellectually flamboyant Robert Hughes, conjured notions of alienation and weirdness in their catalogue essays for *Recent Australian Painting*, held at the Whitechapel Gallery.

Pierse's critical interpretation intensifies in the third chapter as the Australian contingent and their representation gathers momentum. Clark was still actively promoting Australian art and proposed the *Twelve Australian Artists* exhibition at the New Burlington Galleries in 1952, and various associations, such as the Australian Artists' Association (AAA), were formed to 'create a permanent framework for Australians living or working in Europe'.²

Pierse is unquestionably at his best with his reading of the persuasively charming Robertson, who cemented his friendship with Clark early and was subsequently benefited throughout his career. Not only did the Whitechapel Gallery become a mecca for large, ambitious shows, many drawn from within England (such as the first large-scale exhibition of J.M.W. Turner in 1953), but also from the US (including Jackson Pollock and Mark Rothko retrospectives), all designed to create a 'plurality of narratives'. Australian artists also benefited, with Nolan and Arthur Boyd enjoying solo exhibitions; here, again, the hand of Clark was evident. Certainly, Clark and Robertson played an extraordinary role in bringing Australian art out of the postcolonial closet and into a new world market, and, indeed, the *Recent Australian Painting* exhibition was a watershed for London-based Australian artists.

Like Clark before him, Robertson's journey to Australia to select works for the Whitechapel exhibition galvanised the local art communities, and Pierse reveals the dynamics operating within the various Australian abstractionist and figurative camps. Unlike Clark, however, Robertson looked to the US where he felt 'informed taste [was] more energetic and *in the present*',³ and thus his strong preference for abstract expressionism. This was a boon for Australian abstractionists, whose large inclusion in the exhibition was celebrated.

The cohesive spirit of the expatriate artistic community is encapsulated in Pierse's study. Their camaraderie and reliable generosity endeared many to the British, but there was also a determined effort by the critics to create an 'Australian school'. Bernard Smith brilliantly captured this:

One might be forgiven for believing that the central tenet of this school

asserts that Australian art began in the East End of London (Whitechapel precisely) during the mid-1950s. That, by an odd coincidence, she emerged armed fully grown from the head of Sir Kenneth Clark, after it had been neatly cleft by the boomerang of Mr Bryan Robertson (Chief Celtic midwife to our London Australiana), at the very moment when the London critical public were ready and willing to embrace her.⁴

Pierse takes this further by referring to those artists who were intent on a mythologising Australia though their iconography, which, to many, seemed like a marketing ploy and 'selling out to foreigners'. If Nolan was at the helm of this, one has to remember the power of reciprocity. As Clark wrote in 1949, 'You all encouraged me as much as I encouraged you.'⁵ The 'king makers' were not only important in evolving a receptive climate for Australian art but also in their continued promotion of these artists. Apart from certain commercial galleries, such as Zwemmers, Rex Nan Kivell's Redfern Gallery, and the Marlborough Galleries, which were all sympathetic to outsiders, a number of Australian women were also active during the 1950s and 1960s, in particular Alannah Coleman.

Pierse hits full stride in Chapter 7, titled 'A Horse Designed by a Committee'. His reading of the major Australian exhibition at the Tate Gallery in 1963, *Australian Painting: Colonial, Impressionist, Contemporary*, includes an illuminating account of the bureaucratic Commonwealth Art Advisory Board, which consisted of conservative men appointed by the grand mandarin Sir Robert Menzies. Their dealings and the organisation of this large exhibition was spoiled with

exasperating quarrels.

A great deal is covered in this extremely well-documented and superbly illustrated book, with insights into the lives and careers of Australian artists in Britain. Even if these down-to-earth 'rough diamond colonials' were a diversion for the aristocracy until Britain's own new generation of artists matured in the swinging 1960s, the benefits they reaped were manifold. As Charles Blackman said, it would have been a 'tragedy' if he had not gone overseas, for that was where he matured as a distinctive painter. Equally, had he stayed, he might have been swamped by the huge European market. Even Brett Whiteley, the 'best placed to thrive in the sixties UK art world',⁶ eventually returned via a two-year Harkness Fellowship in New York. Tony Underhill jokingly asked Arthur Boyd 'When are you going home?', and, while Boyd, Nolan, and Underhill permanently settled in England, the Australian contingent was largely repatriated by 1964.

Pierse concludes his detailed study of the long Antipodean summer when Australian artists were a catalyst for a recovering arts climate in Britain, with Coleman's 1963 exhibition *Australian Painting and Sculpture in Europe Today*. If Louis James had detected signs of a shift away from Australian art in the late 1950s, then Coleman's exhibition was their swansong.

1. Simon Pierse, *Australian Art and Artists in London, 1950-1965: An Antipodean Summer*, 45.

2. *Ibid.*, 50.

3. Bryan Robertson, 'An Artist in Our Time', *The Listener*, 22 June 1961: 1079, original emphasis.

4. Bernard Smith, *The Age*, 1963, quoted in Simon Pierse, *Australian Art and Artists in London*, 125.

5. Kenneth Clark, quoted in *ibid.*, 6.

6. Simon Pierse, *Australian Art and Artists in London*, 232.