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

Christine France

THE SUCCESS OF AUSTRALIAN PAINTERS in London between the late 1950s and early 1960s has been the subject of academic debate as to whether the vitality of work which appealed so much to English audiences was the product of Australia's isolation or due to the fact that Australian art held its own in an international context.

Simon Pierse's book is a welcome addition to Australian art history. In his account of Australian art in London from the postwar years to the swinging sixties, we are presented with an English perspective that draws on previously untapped archival material from prime players such as Sir Kenneth Clark (later Baron Clark) and Bryan Robertson, former director of London's Whitechapel Gallery. Pierse enables us to look thoroughly at the role of curators, critics, bureaucrats and their friendships. He examines the effect of postwar austerity on artists and the transition from Empire to Commonwealth, which, at times, resulted in art being used as cultural export. Pierse's inclusion of a certain amount of anecdotal material brings the text to life.

Pierse discusses the networks of contacts: Clark's friendship with Joseph Burke, chair of fine arts at the University of Melbourne, and his support of Sidney Nolan and Russell Drysdale; his mentorship of Robertson during the early years at Whitechapel Gallery; and Clark's early contact with art historian Bernard Smith, who was, later, frustrated in his efforts to hold an Antipodean exhibition there. (Clark had suggested Smith try Whitechapel but Robertson wanted a broader exhibition which reflected the diversity of Australian art, including both abstract and figurative work, developing instead the 1961 exhibition 'Recent Australian Painting'.)

Robertson's interest in Australian painting went back to the early 1950s when as a friend of artist Roy de Maistre, Harry Tatlock Miller and set designer Loudon Sainthill he met a number of Australian artists. In 1957 he held a large retrospective for Sidney Nolan's fortieth birthday. He had a great sympathy for young artists and, as Lawrence Daws relates, would introduce them to major art figures. It was Robertson who chose Charles Blackman, Daws and Brett Whiteley

to represent their country at the 1961 Biennale des Jeunes in Paris. 'Recent Australian Painting' has become the most discussed exhibition of the period but, as Pierse rightly points out, the catalogue essays by Robertson (emphasising the diversity and the exotic) and Robert Hughes (on the isolation of the country) were the most influential.

One of the many interesting aspects of Pierse's research is the inclusion of both English and Australian criticism of 'Recent Australian Painting' and the official exhibition 'Australian Painting: Colonial, Impressionist, Contemporary' (1963), which was held at the Tate Gallery under the auspices of the Commonwealth Art Advisory Board. First shown at the Adelaide Festival of Arts, 'Australian Painting: Colonial, Impressionist, Contemporary' was widely criticised for the lack of consultation with state galleries and the under-representation of contemporary art. It was this criticism, and the pioneering role of Robertson's exhibition, which influenced lukewarm comments from a number of English critics.

Where most Australian histories have concentrated solely on the above two exhibitions, Pierse discusses the peripheral examples: 'Twelve Australian Artists' (1953) at the New Burlington Galleries; 'Fifteen Contemporary Australian Painters' (1960) at the New Vision Centre Gallery; 'Commonwealth Art Today' (1962–63) at the Commonwealth Institute; and Alannah Coleman's 'Australian Painting and Sculpture in Europe Today' (1963), which travelled from the United Kingdom to Frankfurt, Germany.

At times the structure of this book can be confusing, with references to artists such as Whiteley and Daws preceding details of how and when they arrived in London. Nevertheless it is a valuable resource, essential for anyone interested in the period or in the development of an Australian school of painting – if indeed such a school exists.

Simon Pierse, *Australian Art and Artists in London, 1950–1965: An Antipodean Summer*, Ashgate, London, 2012, hardcover, 314 pp., \$160.

