Modernism revived, Realism reduced

Terry Smith discusses Humphrey McQueen's book The Black Swan of Trespass.

Why should modern art be of interest to communists?

Because it is a major element of bourgeois ideology.

Because cultural practices under capitalism are sorted into a hierarchy in which the professional arts are the most celebrated, acting as the course of the unattainable cultural tokens of the rich (both as individuals and as a class). These professional arts also act as laboratories of new images, forms and ideas for the “lesser” productions of advertising and amateur art.

Because, despite these factors, some “popular cultural practices and artists ("modernist" as well as "realist") can directly serve the political aims of communism and, it is often claimed, provide models of freedom (“unalienated labor”, for example).

In Chile in 1971 Michele Mattelart set out a project which she described thus:

The concept of modernity has assumed the role of an aegis, a watchword in the production of goods and signs in capitalist industrial society. A thorough inquiry into this concept may prove to be one of the more worthwhile ways of approaching the guiding principle of a system of social domination which justifies its dynamism and its notion of progress by repeating every day and ad nauseam the litany of constant improvement in unlimited consumption and technological happiness.

She went on to begin to characterise modernity as:

.... an ideology of constant movement and progression, daily regeneration and effervescent mutation, masking the permanence and static quality of the structures of the order which generated it. Our objective is to analyse the insistent modernity imposed upon us every day by society (advertising jingles, elegant fashions, new forms, artificial atmospheres, plastics, savoir-faire) as well as the ensemble of images, the spiritual and motivating dimensions which assure individual and collective response to a conception of development enclosed in its own determinism.1

"Modernity" is a key concept in imperialist domination of dependent countries. "The Modern" becomes the latest styling of that which the metropolitan economy produces for its privileged. It is exported as normality, upward valuation of the work of women artists, particularly those most active in the...
to dependent countries where it is attainable only by the compradores yet remains an aspiration for most. A political history of "modernity" in Australia has yet to be written.2

It would seem, then, that a study of modernism in relation to the visual arts would be of considerable political interest if it could respond to questions like these:

1. How did the ideology of modernity take shape in Australia in the context of our imperialist dependence, and what were the particular roles of the visual arts in this development?

2. How did modernism take shape within the relatively autonomous development of Australian art itself?

3. What were the resistances to capitalist modernity, and what forms should they take now? What is to be learnt from the progressive aspects of modernity and of artistic modernism? What has this inquiry to say to radical cultural work now?

4. Can a study of modernity and modernism throw any light on vexed issues such as the appropriate model for Australia's relationships to international capital?

The Black Swan of Trespass as its subtitle The Emergence of Modernist Painting in Australia to 1944, indicates, focuses on the second of these questions and deals partially and inadequately with the third. McQueen does not acknowledge the economic role of modernity — indeed, he curiously accepts the
"new world" implied by scientific progress, the discovery of the unconscious, the agitation of the working classes and the unfamiliarity of art. He explores the responses of artists to these factors, not their response to the reconstruction of work, "leisure", everyday life, the media and the state, affected by monopoly capital in different ways, at different times, in different places throughout the world. His method challenges standard histories of Australian art but, in the end, gives us lesser modernism than they provide. And, in the course of chasing this contracting subject, he deals drastically with both the Communist Party and socially committed artists. On first reading, one is dazzled by the frequent brilliance of the writing, the daring freshness of vision, the breathtaking insults. But, on reflection, the book seems to have so much reduced its subjects that it becomes a route from which one can only emerge puzzled, disappointed and sadly unconvinced.

These are serious reservations; they are based on a year's thinking with the book, teaching with it in a course on Australian art and (visual) culture, and discussing it often. I will try to indicate what the reservations are based on, beginning with the book's positive achievements.

McQueen's subject — why and how modernist painting emerged in Australia in the period before the mid-1940s — is of pivotal importance in grasping the history of our art. The conventional view, most influentially promulgated by Bernard Smith in his *Australian Painting 1788-1970* (Oxford U.P., 1971), is that modernism "arrived" here via reproductions, books and other information, and that it developed through phases roughly consonant with the successive phases of European modernism from Post-Impressionism onwards. McQueen ridicules this as a "station-master's log-book" approach to art's history and, quite properly, argues that modernism arose here primarily "from and through identifiably local conditions". He does not indicate the degree to which he would insist that this is also the case for other tendencies in Australian art, but the change of emphasis in this case is sure to lead to the question being asked in others, which is all to the good. Many people, including myself, have pushed explanations in terms of provincial dependence too far. (More accurately, we have pushed explanations appropriate for the period in which they were developed — that is, the mid-1960s to the mid-1970s — too far back into Australian art's history.)

McQueen's major methodological assumption — that modernism is not merely a style of painting but rather "a range of responses to a nexus of social-artistic-scientific problems" — is a novel attempt to break with the inadequacies of conventional art history and to locate artmaking as an ideological (material) practice. Specifying his "nexus" a little more closely, the key "social" problem becomes class struggle, the "scientific" ones are "the unconscious" and "space-time" (relativity), and the major "artistic" one is landscape. The relationships between these problems, and the artists' responses to them, are seen as constantly changing, producing "new movements, styles and subjects".

This approach generates some startlingly new perspectives. McQueen's unrivalled ability to lay bare the contours of petty bourgeois ideology is revealed in the passages on J.S. MacDonald, and Daryl, Lionel and Norman Lindsay. At the same time he shows how often they grasped the situation more clearly than their modernist opponents. Exchanges between painters and poets are explored more thoroughly than hitherto, although much remains to be done. Attention is called to the formative role of ideologues such as Sir Keith Murdoch. Relatively devalued styles such as surrealism are given due emphasis, as are artists such as Elioth Gruner, and lesser-known aspects of celebrated artists' work are highlighted (for example, the 1920s Flinders Ranges landscapes of Hans Heysen). McQueen's emphasis on Margaret Preston is both part of, and a stimulus to, the positive and growing upward valuation of the work of women artists, particularly those most active in the
1920s and 1930s.

Yet, despite these gains, the picture of Australian modernism with which we are left is not, in the end, a clear one. Indeed, we are left wondering why so much attention was devoted to what ultimately emerges as a relatively insignificant development.

Style terms in art history are notoriously opaque and misleading. Usually coined as rule-of-thumb descriptions, they gradually acquire a normative force — not only for historians, but for artists as well. "Modernism" has developed two usages. The general one begins as synonymous with "Modern Art", picking out the tendency to give visual form to "the experiences of modern life" (Baudelaire): That is, the urban, bohemian intelligentsia's responses to social changes effected by the (French) bourgeoisie through the nineteenth century. Towards the end of the century, the term gradually becomes more specific and two elements assume priority in the aesthetic ideologies and the work of modernist artists: personal expression and formal innovation. In this sense, the "isms" of the late nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries appear as the "flowering" of modernism as a tendency.

The second, extremely nebulous usage is as a style term consonant with "Cubism" or "Fauvism", usually pointing to art which does not fit clearly into any of these terms but which is nonetheless abstract in form. Underlying this usage is the (now questioned) assumption that modern art moves increasingly, necessarily, towards ever-greater abstraction. In this latter sense, the term is used more often in cultural provinces than in the metropolitan centres. And, in both senses, it appears most often during periods when the tendency was perceived as in crisis, or as changing significantly: in the 1830/40s, the 1920s and the later 1960/70s.

Much would be gained by dropping the secondary usage altogether. But natural languages do not work so simply, given than one of their important jobs is to mark out "temporary" meanings with such "transposed" usages. This has been the case in Australia; two phases of the modernist tendency have been reduced to style terms: the 1910s, when local artists began to explore Post-Impressionist techniques, and the later 1920s/early 1930s when local artists began to adopt/develop late Cubist, Art Deco, geometric abstractionist styles. Usually, only these tow developments are labelled "Modernist" in Australian art, the former is devalued in comparison with the "more advanced" (read: "up-to-date") latter, and a large range of artists who were clearly modernists are in the general sense outlined above are labelled with other style terms (e.g. surrealists, figurative expressionists, Angry Penguins, etc.). A central problem in McQueen's account is that he has fallen victim of this specialised (albeit confused) usage: his "nexus" approach is not applied to modernism as a tendency but to modernism as a style. The artists whose responses he characterises as "modernist" are only those already labelled as such by prior, narrow and questionable usage. He certainly treats other artists, and shows them responding to the same nexus, but they are said to respond differently. The result is a sense of analytical overkill, the emergence of one artist, Margaret Preston, as the only "real" modernist and, despite McQueen's acute criticisms, the values, priorities and basic organisation of previous accounts are perpetuated. We are still left with the impression that cultural struggles were fought out between two monolithic aesthetic ideologies: progressive modernism (a.k.a. Anti-Modernism or Nationalism).

There are other important methodological assumptions which prevent The Black Swan of Trespass from becoming a full and balanced treatment of its subject (although McQueen could reasonably claim that his intention was more polemical than this).

The shift of emphasis to the local origins of modernism has gone too far — relationships with European art and ideology are reduced to token connections.

Like most writers on art, McQueen does not have a developed sense of the competing visual cultures which are part of the ways ideological struggle is shaped in a society.
Visual cultures are produced and reproduced in and across different media, groups and class fractions. His respect for the autonomy of art is properly aimed against mechanical determinism (he rejects reflectio theory in favor of a notion of "response"), but it is nearly total. The autonomy is relative, after all; high art is not entirely separated from other elements in the visual culture. Some specific confusions result.

McQueen mostly accepts, for example, the modernist dismissal of the "national school" of landscape painters (such as Arthur Streeton) as conservative. But recent research into the close relationship of the Heidelberg School artists to photography and to black and white newspaper and book illustrations, reinforced by studies such as Connell and Irving's *Class Structure in Australian History* (Longmans, 1980), has led to the perception that this school emerged as part of the populist hegemony of the mercantile bourgeoisie, setting up contexts for painting open to larger and broader audiences than hitherto acknowledged. The character of this populism in the 1920s and 1930s needs to be charted, but already new questions are being asked, such as: what were the relationships between Heidelberg School landscapes and the widely-disseminated images of World War I? Can we continue to dismiss the academic landscapists of the 1920s and 1930s as reactionaries and poor artists when we recognise that it was they who expressed a regionalist relationship to the land, a relationship which accounts for their huge popularity as shown in reproductions and imitations by amateur artists? McQueen is right to revalue Heysen and Gruner, but these questions should lead us to a revaluation of a great number of artists' work, and to seeing a strong populist imagery which was used as ideological material by different class fractions at different times. On this basis, we will be able to more clearly assess the conservative and/or progressive nature of the imagery.

Similarly, McQueen's stress on art's autonomy compromises his critique of the artists and writers associated with the Communist Party during the 1930s and 1940s. He fails to recognise that their paintings were part of a progressive tendency to work across a variety of media simultaneously. He thus devalues Counihan's contribution, and virtually ignores McClintock, Cant, Dalgarno, Maughan, Finey et al. (I will return to this treatment of this tendency later.) The same stress on high art limits severely his account of modernism: he ignores the great degree to which it was imported, and developed locally, in design, fashion, commercial art and architecture, often preceding developments in painting and certainly more widespread than them.

More generally, any treatment of modernism should deal with the prima facie relationship between it and the growth of monopoly capitalism. McQueen does so through his central notion of artists responding to a nexus of problems. But this fails to mark the class character of modernism: for despite all the refusals and counter-moves by particular artists, and the anachronistic tastes of some members of the bourgeoisie, modernism becomes the cultural style most favoured by the progressive sections of the European, then the United States bourgeoisie. And so it is in Australia. It is clear in the support given modernism by the Murdochs, Lloyd Jones, Horderns, et al, and in the class situations of nearly all of the modernist painters. But, as Bernard Smith points out in his review (*Meanjin* 4, 1979, 523, citing the work of Mary Eagle), it is clearest in the growth of retail trading and advertising, especially in Sydney, in the 1920s and 1930s.

The pages of *Art in Australia* and *The Home*, the windows of David Jones and Horderns, the society photography and the architectural magazines of the period are dominated by modernist imagery. This points to the economic base of Australian modernism, but a full consideration would locate its class character by pointing to the limited circulation of cultural media such as *The Home* and by contrasting its design forms with those of the bigger circulation *Women's Weekly*. 
A recognition of the class character of modernism is, I think, fundamental to McQueen's conception of modernism, but is curiously, not declared anywhere in the book. I think it is also present in his evaluation of Margaret Preston, to whom over a quarter of the book is devoted. I sense a rather simple equation: Preston as the single most progressive practitioner of the cultural style of the most progressive class fraction. Preston was, even in her own strongly stated terms, an artist of frequently variable achievement: the still-lifes, flower pieces and the self portrait of the late 1920s, and the landscapes of the early 1940s, are outstanding but much of the rest is not. There are, as well, some problems with both Preston's artistic program and McQueen's presentation of it. Without wishing to reduce to impossible crudity a lifelong struggle, the essence of Preston's program can be seen in her efforts to apply formal lessons learnt from studying European Late Cubism and Aboriginal art to Australian subjects (local flora, places) in order to create a truly national art. But we need only to ask whether any viewer would be likely to see her work as Australian if its subject matter were something other than distinctly local flora and places, to see that too great a claim is being made. McQueen too often mistakes intention for achievement and, more importantly, mistakes subject matter for content in his discussion of her work. For example, if we take the Prestons in the collection of the National Gallery (touring in the exhibition *Aspects of Australian Art 1900-1940*) we need only contrast the fine and subtle *Banksia* 1927 to the slack, coagulated *Watermelon* 1930 to make the point about variability of achievement, and to cite *The Aeroplane* woodcut, or contrast the two woodcuts *Plaid Bow* and *Waratah*, to demonstrate how much the claim for national content depends on her depiction of local subject matter.6

Margaret Preston is singled out as the
major — indeed, the only — modernist of the between-wars period. All the others are relegated to the lowly level of ‘surface modernists’, that is, artists whose only relationship to the tendency was at the superficial level of adopted style. This accurately characterises her position compared to that of Sydney modernists such as Fizelle, Balson and, to a lesser extent, Crowley, but it is inaccurate in every other respect. Permitting only one ‘real’ modernist severely limits McQueen’s thesis about modernism’s emergence (as opposed to arrival) to a single case. Artists of equal, if not greater, interest than Preston are not given their due: Grace Cossington-Smith was technically just as daring, more consistent, and searched across a greater range of content — yet most critics, including McQueen, fail to go much past a reading of her style as retarded Post-Impressionism. The art of the Melbourne modernists is hardly mentioned, the significance of George Bell’s teaching goes unnoticed.

It is here that McQueen’s failure to question the received notions of modernism as a style leads to a glaring omission. A broad view of modernism as a tendency in Australian art must recognise that the “Angry Penguins” — Nolan, Tucker, Boyd, Perceval and so on — were extremely inventive modernists, responding to the problems which McQueen and others identify. These artists drew on stylistic sources similar to those usually labelled modernist (late Cubism, geometric abstraction). But they also responded to many other influences, particularly surrealism and expressionism, working them into a kind of abstract yet autobiographical image-making that was unique in art of the period. As Bernard Smith noted in the review cited above, expressionism seems non-existent as a category in McQueen’s text. The ways in which these artists took the liberal option, and their art during the 1950s become locked into “signature” narrative series in bush settings (ideal ideological material for the industrial bourgeoisie), are issues beyond our present scope.

McQueen’s treatment of the conservatives and the modernists appears extremely generous when placed against his dismissive condemnation of the social realists. Artists such as Noel Counihan and writers such as Bernard Smith are shown as incapable of going beyond the political limitations of the Communist Party — a party which had been ‘born in a series of defeated strikes in the 1920s, grew up amongst the unemployed of the 1930s, and matured in time to help lead the war effort’ (p. 75). The Party and the artists are seen as reformists because they failed to ‘raise the alternative of public art’ and because they were incapable of offering ‘a vision of a radically transformed future’. Rather, they were tied to bourgeois forms such as novels and easel paintings, and to the depiction of ‘work, privilege and suffering’ in the past and present.

McQueen’s concept of the media for public art is too narrow. There were very few murals by Party artists in the 1940s; most were done in the 1950s and 1960s (eg, in the Waterside Workers building by Rod Shaw and others, and in the Party’s Day Street headquarters by Counihan). But cartoons, illustrations, photographs, layouts, banners, posters and floats are also forms of public art, and there were plenty of them, often done by people who were also painters. However, it would be unhistorical to imagine that it was a simple matter for artists to move suddenly and easily from specialisation in one medium to working across a range of media. As in Russia, easel painting was highly valued — even for artists such as Counihan who came to it after experience in other public media. But the point remains that this working across media was one of the important factors making the art of the social realists more socially relevant and progressive (in the circumstances) than that of the realist, modernist or “national school” artists.

McQueen’s basic equation is that the work of the social realist artists and critics did not get beyond the limits which the Party reached in its work. A whiff of The Eighteenth Brumaire... despite the fact that Marx was
talking about the general relationship between a class and its political and literary representatives, where McQueen is referring to relations between the political and literary (artistic) representatives themselves. The implication as to class here is that the Party, the artists and the critics were petty bourgeois, assuming that the specific conditions of their emancipation were the general conditions for the salvation of modern society and the avoidance of class struggle. The equation is unhistorically neat: a reading of Harry Gould’s pamphlet *Art, Science and Communism* (1946) Jack Beasley’s reminiscences, Bernard Smith’s recollections and the little research done on debates at the time indicate a searching for positions by both Party workers and artists, rather than a Zhdanovist fixity.

There are some odd aspects of Party-related social realism in the 1940s which demonstrate this. Counihan’s best-known paintings, such as *At the Start of the March 1932*, were done in 1943 and 1944 — why such a retrospective vision? Smith’s *Place, Taste and Tradition* of 1945 condemns most modernism as aestheticist, and celebrates realism as the present strength and future hope of Australian art, but it is also the first history to treat Australian art firmly in terms of European styles. Illustrations of Party newspapers and much of the Workers Art Club linocuts and woodblocks seem heavy with Socialist Realist imagery, especially the heroic male worker, yet they also look back to Expressionism and the Australian black and white tradition. Many strong realists, such as McClintock and Cant, were also expressionist surrealists at the same time.

McQueen finds the social realism of the Australian artists lacking in comparison to a kind of art which, he implies, was both possible and necessary: ‘proletarian art’. This is not necessarily an art made, or even liked, by proletarians; rather, it ‘points at relationships between past and future, oppression and liberation, Imperialism and socialism; it approaches fundamental truths about how the transitions from one to the other can be made’ (p. 68). Unfortunately, it appears in his text as an abstract, reified object, with only Leger’s and Rivera’s names given as instances. It is just as distant as European modernism. It is so generally stated that almost no art could be read as qualifying, or a lot could — including, ironically, that of Noel Counihan (of the mid 1930s to the mid 1950s).

Although McQueen cites class struggle as the key social problem in the modernist nexus, the working class is given no form in the book, except as a trigger to conservative reaction. Working class cultures have no existence, so social realism’s relationships to them are not explored. He comes close to Trotsky’s early position: no revolutionary art until the Revolution, no proletarian culture or art at all, because the period of the dictatorship is a period of transition. Neither the Party nor the artists associated with it were progressive, so the only art that was, was modernism — actually, only Margaret Counihan’s flashbacks occur because of the importance he placed on the expression of personal experience (a key element of modernism, as we have seen). The 1943-4 paintings visualise aspects of working class life in the present through images of its experience of the Depression as witnessed by the artist. His use of colour is also modernist. Smith’s writing of Australian art’s history in European style terms follows from his acceptance of the other key emphasis of modernism, the stress on formal innovation. He defends internationalism in art against the chauvinism of the ‘national school’, but modernist internationalism is bourgeois, not proletarian — it is, again, not a matter of subject matter, but content. These are the sorts of questions which need to be asked when a full account is written.
Preston and some aspects of surrealism. There is one further sense in which this amounts to an inaccurately thin picture: it ignores the realism forced on a number of artists by their war experiences, and in their efforts to visualise startlingly different social relations. We need to look again at Dobells such as Night Loading at Perth and Knocking Off Time, Bankstown Airport, at Drysdale's images of the rural proletariat, at Badham's crowded interiors and Kilgour's scenes of work and leisure. If in Place, Taste and Tradition, Bernard Smith tended to label as realists too many naturalist painters (outside the "national" landscapists, of course), McQueen goes too far in the other direction.

The real object of inquiry here is not modernism as a style but modernism as a visual cultural tendency in relation to other tendencies, such as regionalism and realism. It is both richer, and more problematic, than McQueen allows. It forces us to ask hard questions about image making under capitalism across the whole range of visual cultural practices, about image making within bourgeois ideology and against it.

The Australian labour movement has strong visual traditions but their history has not been written. Some work has been done in the past, some is being done now, but much more remains to be done. The Communist Party has, at times, played an important role in working class and oppositional cultural work but too few of its members have taken the time to secure this work historically.

There have been, and are, strong political reasons for doing so: the cultural arena is a crucial site of political struggle (as is so obvious when we look at Britain, for example), a domain through which more and more people enter into political work. The Black Swan of Trespass is the first book on Australian art written by a marxist since Bernard Smith's Place, Taste and Tradition of 1945. A detailed analysis of the successes and failures of the radical artists of the 1930s and 1940s is as important as that other, related necessity: a grasping of the possibilities for radical cultural practice now.

notes


3 Irene Harris, graduate work, Department of Fine Arts, Sydney University.


5 These questions are being asked particularly by Ian Burn, Nigel Lendon, Charles Merewether and Ann Stephen in an essay forthcoming in Arena.


7 The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte, Moscow 1934, 40-1.


9 Leon Trotsky, Literature and Revolution, 1924, introduction.