Engaging Aboriginal art from the idea of Australia

Ian A. McLean

University of Wollongong, imclean@uow.edu.au

Follow this and additional works at: https://ro.uow.edu.au/lhapapers

Part of the Arts and Humanities Commons, and the Law Commons

Recommended Citation
McLean, Ian A., "Engaging Aboriginal art from the idea of Australia" (2012). Faculty of Law, Humanities and the Arts - Papers. 591.
https://ro.uow.edu.au/lhapapers/591

Research Online is the open access institutional repository for the University of Wollongong. For further information contact the UOW Library: research-pubs@uow.edu.au
Engaging Aboriginal art from the idea of Australia

Abstract
In writing the first national history of Australian art Bernard Smith was instrumental in inventing the idea of an Australian national culture. In this respect his histories should be understood in the context of a wider postcolonial – or at least post-empire – discourse that shaped the idea of Australia after the world wars. Galvanizing the many threads of this discourse was the idea of an independent nation state. What role did Aboriginal art have in this discourse? As a committed Marxist Smith had a great deal of sympathy for the downtrodden, including Aborigines. However the idea of the nation state is inimical to that of Indigenous nations. This paper analyses the role of these contradictory forces in shaping Smith's conceptions of Aboriginal art and its place in Australian art.

Keywords
aboriginal, idea, art, australia, engaging

Disciplines
Arts and Humanities | Law

Publication Details
McLean, I. A.. Engaging Aboriginal art from the idea of Australia. The Institute Building, City Road, University of Sydney. 9 November. 2012.

This conference paper is available at Research Online: https://ro.uow.edu.au/lhapapers/591
Engaging Aboriginal art from the idea of Australia.
In writing the first national history of Australian art Bernard Smith was instrumental in inventing the idea of an Australian national culture. In this respect his histories should be understood in the context of a wider postcolonial – or at least post-empire – discourse that shaped the idea of Australia after the world wars. Galvanizing the many threads of this discourse was the idea of an independent nation state. What role did Aboriginal art have in this discourse? As a committed Marxist Smith had a great deal of sympathy for the downtrodden, including Aborigines. However the idea of the nation state is inimical to that of Indigenous nations. This paper analyses the role of these contradictory forces in shaping Smith’s conceptions of Aboriginal art and its place in Australian art.

“Anthropologists have hijacked Australian Art History”: Art History/Anthropology in Bernard and beyond
The advent and spectacular success of contemporary Australian Indigenous art caught almost everyone, including most local art historians and art critics, by surprise. This art did not fit conveniently into existing paradigms and the then fashionable discourse on contemporary art. Anthropologists who had long been working with various aspects of Indigenous culture were on the ground already and provided ready copy for the hungry art market. Understandably it was basically an empirical and anthropological account of this art, which quickly became the ‘first draft of art history’. This paper
examines the spread of anthropological methods within mainstream Australian art history and questions their relevance within models originally advocated by Bernard Smith

10.30 – 11.00am Discussion of Morning Papers

11.00 – 11.30am Morning Tea

11.30am – 12.00pm Associate Professor John Arnold, Monash University

**Bernard Smith and Jack Lindsay**

This paper will explore the friendship between the expatriate Australian writer Jack Lindsay (1900-1990) and Bernard Smith. Around 1940, Smith read Lindsay's *A Short History of Culture*, published by Gollancz in the previous year. It was a book that considerably influenced his thinking. The two first meet when Smith was in London studying at the Courtauld Institute. They remained friends with a dual common interest: their faith in communism (Lindsay remained a committed communist until his death) and their country of birth. They also had a mutual friend in Noel Counihan, a fellow communist, whom Jack Lindsay first met around 1950. Bernard Smith was one of the few to champion Lindsay's work in Australia. He edited *Culture and History: essays presented to Jack Lindsay* (Sydney: Hale and Iremonger, 1984) and wrote essays on Lindsay's art biographies. They last saw each other when Bernard was in England in 1988.

12.00 – 12.30pm Dr Sheridan Palmer, University of Melbourne

**Ideological conduits and political coat hangers: Bernard Smith on Counihan and Courbet**

The art and ideologies of Noel Counihan and Gustave Courbet correlated strongly with Bernard Smith’s beliefs in a combined aesthetic and political critique of society and, in particular, the ‘interest in the working class, its struggle for decent living standards and a respect for its labour.’ Smith’s attraction to the French ‘apostle of realism’ Courbet the Communard coincided with his conversion to Communism in the late 1930s. By the 1960s, and after years of preparation and research, Smith decided to pay intellectual homage to this important protagonist in the revolution of modernism with a proposed biographical study. The project was, however, shelved when Smith applied for and was successful in his appointment as the inaugural director of the Power Institute at the University of Sydney in 1967. Smith’s sympathy for the unsung heroes of socialism, or artists who were committed to political and representational art as a means of challenging the hegemonic structures of society, is the subject this paper. His committed lines of investigation into social realism, figurative expressionism and his belief that art must communicate to the broad base of the people, the workers of the world, remained constant throughout his life. It was a humanist ideology that reflected his ‘soft Marxism’ and why he felt an obligation to write the biography of his friend Noel Counihan. As Smith wrote; England … has its Hogarth, France its Daumier and Germany its Kollwitz and Australia its Counihan. Such artists are rare birds…. it does not surprise me that Counihan was singled out … And not because he was a communist, but because he died one. Such people are not readily forgiven. Remember Courbet. What Smith saw as uniting Courbet’s art and life with that of Counihan’s were the paradoxes of industrialisation, its liberation and its repressive capitalism, and the turbulence of social and political change. Moreover, Smith’s outstanding ability to contextualise historically, together with his own Marxist aesthetic, enabled a reading of artists who illuminated the ‘revolutionary roots of modern art’, from which he established a dialectic that continues to serve art history today. In this paper I will explore the lines of connection that Smith drew between these two artists.

12.30 – 1.00pm Discussion on mid-morning papers

1.00 – 2.00pm Lunch

2.00pm SESSION TWO

**Bernard Smith the Writer (1) Bernard and the Memoir**

Chair: Dr Christopher Marshall, University of Melbourne
2.00 – 2.30pm
Professor Peter Beilharz, La Trobe University

_Bernard Smith’s Autobiographical Writings_

My main claim in this field is that I am the author of the only book on Bernard's work, _Imagining the Antipodes_, published by Cambridge in 1997. Having written about many aspects of Bernard's work, my inclination at the moment is to suggest that I speak about his autobiographical writings, both _The Boy Adeodatus_ and the _Pavane_. I did not do justice to the first in my book, and though I reviewed the second for Meanjin, it postdated my book, so that I have yet to compare the two works. I should like to pay more attention than I have to his style, and to the difference between these books, what is spoken and what remains unspoken, and so on.

2.30 – 3.00pm
Dr Juliette Peers, RMIT Melbourne

_Pilgrimage to Heidelberg_

As a young man on his first (and disappointing) trip to Melbourne, Bernard Smith took the train out from the Melbourne CBD to explore the site of the famed Eaglemont artists’ camp. He was greatly disillusioned because he discovered to his surprise that the hillsides were built over by encroaching suburbia according to his autobiography. In reality (and not mentioned by Smith) what awaited the pilgrim was not everyday suburbia, but expensive, free standing villas, even mansions, with many references to British and European architecture of the day, especially revival styles. However the pilgrimage demonstrated the importance that Smith accorded to the Heidelberg School/Plein Air School even at this early stage of his career. The paper explores the historiographical construction of the Heidelberg School/Plein Air School in the scholarly, curatorial and popular mind and the role that Bernard Smith’s writings have played in this process, with attention to the detailed prose of Australian Painting and the values that Smith’s implicitly links to the Heidelberg School/Plein Air School. It overviews the role of the Communist Party in Australia in the 1930s-1950s in establishing a tangible vision of the late nineteenth century white Australian past -which has remained tenacious especially in popular culture, not only through validating ironic creative figures such as Roberts and Lawson, but in devising and presenting one of the most popular Australian musical theatre pieces – the folk musical _Reedy River_, set at the time of the Shearers Strike, the development of the “bush band” and publishing the controversial novel _Power Without Glory_. This view is popular and high profiled, but just like the suburbia that Smith walked into after leaving the train, is there another and very different story?

3.00 – 3.30pm
Dr Anita Callaway, University of Sydney

_The Boy Adeodatus goes Bush: But not for long_

Bernard Smith’s sojourn as a school teacher at Murraguldrie in the late 1930s calls to mind Havelock Ellis’s similar teaching experiences at ‘Kanga Creek’ sixty years before. These periods of near isolation in the NSW bush were formative for both young men. For Ellis, it proved to be ‘the most memorable year of my life in formative spiritual growth’; indeed, life in the bush was ‘An Australian Idyll’. For Smith, however, three years of rustication cured him of similar romantic notions: he despaired of the ‘scraggy gums’ that would not conform to the rules of art, distrusted ‘pink bottoms among the wattles’, and abandoned the legacy of Australian impressionism. Just as westerners had learned to define themselves by recording south-sea Otherness (as Smith’s seminal _European Vision_ shows), so Smith himself—once he had recognized the bushman as his antithesis—redefined himself as a modernist art practitioner, critic, and historian, thereby reinventing Australian art history in the process.

3.30 – 4.00pm
Discussion on afternoon papers

4.00 – 4.15pm
Afternoon tea

4.15pm
SESSION THREE

_Bernard Smith the Writer (2) Biography, Autobiography, Art Writing_

Chaired by Jaynie Anderson, Herald Chair of Fine Art, University of Melbourne
4.15 – 4.45pm  Professor John Clark, University of Sydney

Trajectories of the nation in Australian Art Biography: Smith to McQueen
A reading of Bernard Smith’s *The Boy Adeodatus, the portrait of a lucky young bastard*, (1984) and his *Noel Counihan: Artists and Revolutionary* (1993) leads one to think that artistic autobiography and biography form a particular kind of Australian art historical material. How may Bernard Smith’s writings in this field be best compared with other examples such as Humphrey McQueen’s *Tom Roberts* (1996), Drusilla Modejska’s *Stravinsky’s Lunch* (1999) and Janine Burke’s *Australian Gothic: a life of Albert Tucker* (2002)? What kind of art history and what kind of notion of Australia do they serve?

4.45pm – 5.15pm  Dr Simon Pierse, Aberystwyth University

*Peter Fuller, the Celtic midwife and Some [other] Northern Critics of Southern Art*
First published as a foreword to Peter Fuller’s *The Australian Scapegoat: Towards an Antipodean Aesthetic* (1986), Smith’s essay *Some Northern Critics of Southern Art* is a personalised account of his encounters with British and American critics who visited Australia in the post-war period. ‘I knew them all. I lived through it. I saw it happening,’ Smith writes. Sir Kenneth Clark was a ‘genius spotter’ who appropriated Nolan and, like Saint Francis, used him to prop-up the ‘waning vigour of British art.’ But Clark’s interest in Australian art was essentially ‘environmental’. Clement Greenberg, who Smith invited to Australia to give the inaugural Power Lecture in Contemporary Art in 1968, preferred figurative ‘Antipodean painting’ to the ‘second-hand’ work of Australian colour-field painters. Bryan Robertson, described elsewhere by Smith as ‘Chief Celtic midwife to our London Australiana’, looked to America for salvation and in doing so, led British art into provinciality. But Peter Fuller alone had the ‘determination to work out a fully-fledged aesthetic for himself’. ‘As I read Fuller’, Smith wrote, ‘I gain the impression frequently that I am traversing my own past’. This paper explores correspondences between Fuller’s aesthetic philosophy and Smith’s own, especially Fuller’s ‘radical critique of late modernism’. Are ‘the trans-national implications’ of the Antipodean exhibition (1959) confirmed, and its manifesto exonerated, in Fuller’s criticism of reductive and anti-human late modernism with its implied kenosis, or ‘emptying out’ of content and feeling?

5.15 – 5.45pm  Professor Paul Giles, University of Sydney

*The Antipodean Manifesto Fifty Years On*
This paper will consider the intellectual legacy of the “Antipodean Manifesto,” signed in 1959 by Smith and others as a polemical response to Abstract Expressionism and other developments in European and American art. The argument here will be that Smith’s interests in surrealism and Marxism led him to develop a geographically inflected version of cultural materialism that anticipated, in interesting and at times prescient ways, contemporary developments in transnational theory. Rather than seeing the Antipodean Manifesto as a document confined exclusively to the art world politics of the 1950s, this paper will suggest that it can be seen to have a wider cultural resonance in relation to understanding contemporary methodologies of cultural production across a broad spectrum of literary and artistic genres.

5.45 – 6.15pm  Discussion on late afternoon papers

6.30pm approximately  Celebration of Bernard with drinks and canapés in Glebe
Venue: The Toxteth Hotel
Address: 345 Glebe Point Road, Glebe

6.45pm approximately  Max Solling: *Bernard Smith the Activist*
Glebe Society talk
DAY TWO | Saturday 10 November, 2012 Domain Theatre, Art Gallery of NSW, Art Gallery Road, The Domain, Sydney

9.30am Introduction to the Symposium: Dr Michael Brand, Director, Art Gallery of NSW

9.45am SESSION ONE

Bernard Smith and the art museum
Chaired by Dr Andrew Yip, Coordinator Public Programs, Art Gallery of NSW

In a museum career that began in 1945 at the Art Gallery of New South Wales, Bernard Smith raised issues of museum scholarship that continue to inform debates about the role of the professional curator and art educator. His efforts to catalogue the Gallery's collection provided a benchmark for future publications, yet at the same time he held complex views about the value of the museum as a public institution. This session explores Smith’s contribution to models of Australian museological practice and public education.

9.45 - 10.15am Dr James Berryman, University of Melbourne

Documenting art: Bernard Smith, academic art history and the role of the curator

Returning from study in London in 1951, Bernard Smith set himself the task of cataloguing the collection of Australian paintings at the Art Gallery of New South Wales. Ambitiously, Smith modeled his methods on Martin Davies’s scholarly old master catalogues from the National Gallery. As a teacher and art historian, the influence of academic education on the role of the art curator was an enduring concern throughout Smith’s career. Although supporting the shift from connoisseur-collector to academic-professional in matters of curatorship, Smith was not totally happy with the art historical outcomes of this epistemic shift. This paper charts Smith’s interest in art museum scholarship in Australia, with reference to his critique of art historical accounts of modernism and its legacy.

10.15 - 10.45am Associate Professor Joanna Mendelssohn, University of New South Wales

Bernard Smith and the professional art museum

From 1945 when he was first appointed to the Art Gallery of New South Wales, Smith became an advocate for creating professional standards in Australian art museums. His 1953 catalogue of the AGNSW collection became a benchmark for future publications in the field, and a major source for subsequent scholarship in Australian art histories. In the 1970s he became a crucial figure in promoting professional education for future museum staff. This paper will analyse Smith’s contribution to Australian art museums from both within the institution (as employee and consultant) and as an educator of future generations.

10.45 - 11.15am Stephen Miller, Head, Research Library, Art Gallery of New South Wales

Contingency as the guard dog of history: Bernard Smith and the Art Gallery of New South Wales

It has been voiced as a criticism of Smith that his account of Australian art, grounded in stylistic description and analysis, undervalues the contexts in which art is produced. Yet his work at the AGNSW saw him engaged, both practically and theoretically, in issues of art patronage, the market and institutional culture. This paper will examine his work at the AGNSW as a curator of exhibitions, as an educator travelling around rural NSW with the Travelling Art Exhibitions and as an art historian researching the collection and publishing the ground-breaking 1953 catalogue of Australian oils.

11.15 - 11.45am Morning Tea
11.45am - 12.15pm  Dr Ann Stephen, University of Sydney Art Museums

**Bernard the Power curator: soixante-huitard or art shopper?**
Over the tumultuous year of 1968, following the Prague Spring and the Paris student uprisings, Bernard Smith travelled to Europe as Power curator. He acquired almost 60 works for the Power collection in Paris, at the Venice Biennale and the 4th Documenta. This paper will examine how Smith as curator interpreted Power’s visionary bequest ‘to bring the latest ideas about contemporary art to the people of Australia.’

12.15 – 12.45pm  Dr Christopher Marshall, University of Melbourne

**Mind the gap! Bernard Smith versus the museum, 1961-95**
Throughout his career, Bernard Smith manifested a characteristically complex attitude towards the idea of the museum as institution. On the one hand, his political and social sensibilities made him profoundly suspicious of the strong legacy within the museum of authoritarianism and elitism. In 1946 he accordingly denounced “the futility of art museums” for maintaining an exclusionary attitude towards their audiences – an attitude that was anathema to his own socially inclusive commitment to full public programming and art education. At the same time, though, Smith remained wedded to what we would now recognize as a traditionalist – and in its own way also elitist – model of the curator as specialist keeper whose worth was to be judged not so much by the flashy distractions of populist temporary exhibitions, as rather by his or her long-term commitment to producing impeccably researched permanent collection catalogues based on the model of Martin Davies’ post-war publications on the National Gallery, London. This paper will examine this complex attitude as it manifested itself in two noteworthy instances of Bernard Smith’s public agitation against high profile museum redevelopment projects.

12.45 - 1.15pm  PANEL QUESTION TIME

Participants  Dr James Berryman, University of Melbourne; Stephen Miller, Head, Research Library, of New South Wales; Dr Ann Stephen, University of Sydney Art Museums; Dr Christopher Marshall, University of Melbourne and Joanna Mendelssohn, Associate Professor, University of New South Wales.

1.15 - 2.15pm  Lunch (Self catered, but coffee and tea provided)

2.15 – 4.15pm  ROUND TABLE

**Beyond Bernard... The Future of Art Writing in Australia**
Chaired by Mark Ledbury, Power Professor of Art History and Visual Culture, University of Sydney

Participants  Dr Christopher Allen, *The Australian*; Associate Professor Rex Butler, University of Queensland; Professor Andrew McNamara, Queensland University of Technology; Amelia Groom art writer and PhD student, University of Sydney and Katrina Grant, editor, Electronic Melbourne Art Journal and ‘Melbourne art network’.

4.15 - 5.45pm  Closing Reception, Yiribana Foyer, Art Gallery of NSW