

An exhibition of Noel Counihan's work was held in the National Gallery in Melbourne from 4 October to 5 December, 1983 in connection with the artist's seventieth birthday. A long-standing member of the Communist Party of Australia, Counihan's art has always responded to the great social and human issues of the times. But in October 1981 he suffered a heart attack and stroke and it was feared that his artistic life may have ended. But he has resumed work.

In this edited interview, conducted by Dave Davies at Noel Counihan's Melbourne suburban home in October 1983, he looks back on many decades of activity and tells of the influence of his confrontation with death on his life and work.

ART AND POLITICS

Interview by
Dave Davies



Basil Monson

AN AMBITION TO DISTURB

Many years ago I recall your saying that you had "an ambition to disturb". Is that still true?

Yes, that has been pretty constant. But not in simple black-and-white terms. A statement like that could be interpreted in a very simplistic way, like the old "shock the bourgeois" idea which has played a part in modern artistic history. It was the bohemian revolt against bourgeois convention, the stance of shocking the respectable and the established. I mean something more subtle than that.

I have tried, particularly in more recent years, to find images which would disturb people because they would be on some common level. I have tried — to use an old expression of Bukharin — to socialise feelings. Bukharin, being a Russian, used a term that probably had its origins in Tolstoyism, although Tolstoy wouldn't have used it. Tolstoy's view was that art was essentially bound up with communication on the level of the feelings and the emotions.

Now, there is something in that. Artists don't necessarily just give expression to their own feelings — they give expression to widely-felt emotions. Somehow through their imagery they correlate their experiences with other people's. They tap other people's experiences by probing into their own.

Can you give an example of this from one of your own works?

I had one striking experience in the studio within the last 10 years. I had painted a picture which is very much an image arising out of my childhood, which I retain vividly. It was not a happy one and the atmosphere of domestic discord, violence and unhappiness played a very big part in my life. Through my work you can find evidence of it. You find images which are really childhood memories, many of which go back to my mother.

In the late 1950s I painted a picture which Ailsa O'Connor described in an article in our press as a pioneer feminist painting. It's called "The Wife" and it is a statement of sympathy for and solidarity with the position of women. It's a painting of a domestic scene, simply a man and a woman at the dining table, obviously a painting of intense discord. There is nothing between these two people to bring them together, there is only the distance between them.

In the early 1970s I painted an extension of that which was much more violent. I called it "The Parents" and it is a picture of a struggling pair. It's quite horrible because it's a horrible situation.

A youngish couple, looking for a work of mine, came to the studio and I showed them this picture that I was just finishing. I turned to see the young

woman with tears streaming down her face. That picture had rocked her because it was a picture of her family background.

You have spoken of probing your own experiences. Obviously the Depression was one of them. What were some of the others?

The Depression was of profound importance. I grew up and my education commenced then. It's hard to pinpoint anything quite as definite as that period when I was being strongly conditioned and moulded by my environment.

But the Viet Nam war — in which, of course, I didn't take part — included a period of about ten years during which I painted and drew nothing which didn't give expression to some aspect of that war hanging over us like a big black shadow.

You didn't paint demonstrations or anything like that?

No, and I didn't try to paint war scenes. But I tried to say something about our civilian life here in the shadow of the war in Viet Nam. The "Good Life" series and the "Laughing Christ" series each included a number of images which were statements about the war, the hypocrisy and cant of our position here, the despoliation and corruption of masculine virility in the sense that we sent very young men who hardly knew where Viet Nam was. They went off with faces like babies' bums.

That was the "Boy in a Helmet" series?

Yes. In the National Gallery only last week I heard an education officer talking with students in front of the big linocut and she must have spent about 20 minutes probing them about it, making them analyse it and relate it to themselves if they were in the position of that boy. It interested me that I had made an image that she could base a lesson on.

Before your recent illness you spent some time in a small village in France. Why did you go there?

I went there because I felt that I could deal with a theme that doesn't exist in Australia. We have rich farmers, poor farmers, agricultural labourers, but we haven't got a peasantry with a peasant tradition. I was getting the feeling that the peasantry as it is understood in Europe was possibly a class on the way out of history.

Modern capitalism with its multi-nationals was in effect destroying peasant life and having always been interested in labouring people I thought I would have a good look at an



From the "Boy in the Helmet" series

aspect of European peasantry and see what I could do with it.

Opoul is a small Catalan-speaking village in south-western France. They are mainly underprivileged vine growers, separated from the Spanish Catalans across the Pyrenees. We lived there for about six months in 1980 and I drew every day. I think I was profoundly affected by the experience in the village and when we came back I brought my drawings with me.

The village was a microcosm of a much wider range of life, but because it was so small and a village of battlers you could see things clearly and sharply there that you couldn't see in a bigger and more complex social setting. I made a suite of 12 lithographs on the theme of life in a small village and also a number of paintings on the same basis. I regarded the drawings I

brought back as notations and working drawings, the images to be developed back here. They formed the basis of an exhibition before my illness.

On our recent holiday visit we took with us an exhibition of works on paper showing life in the village and they were shown in the town of Perpignon, near Opoul. The French critics said that the peasant theme had been worked to death in French literature and art, and it had taken a person from the other end of the earth to come and give a fresh picture of a way of life that was passing. That was what I had set out to do.

Perhaps my greatest admirer was the village baker. I spent some time studying him at work at 6.30 in the morning. The village bakery is disappearing with bread coming from the big cities, but the one in Opoul has been maintained.

When you were in Paris over a decade ago you spent some time depicting the derelicts — the clochards — and you have said that the insulted and humiliated, the outcasts of the world, are subjects for you.

Yes, I still respond to that theme. I haven't been working on it in the same way in the immediate past. But I did find earlier this year that I was bugged by the constant repetition on TV news of scenes in Beirut of shattered streets with heaps of tattered clothing and one knew that in those little heaps were bodies.

It was the same with the news pictures from El Salvador. I found myself identifying with those heaps of clothes. Trying to do something about it, that is, to make an artistic image based on it, brought me back into painting after a period in which I had been unable to paint or draw because of my illness.

For the greater part of 1981 I could neither paint nor draw at all. The doctor had said that I would never paint again because of the combined effect of the heart attack and the stroke. This time last year I thought he could be right. I was told I had lost half my range of vision, but that was not right. But it is what goes on behind the eyes — you don't paint with your eyes. But every effort I made to paint or draw was a total failure, in some cases because of physical pain.

I had a brief return to Opoul last year. I didn't do any work but I regained a lot of my health. In my own mind I was pessimistic about painting because I felt empty. But then in Paris I felt the need to get home because I felt the need to do some work. The images that got me going were the ones of human wreckage in the streets that we got



From the 'Good Life' series

every night on TV. I did some drawings and two paintings which pleasantly surprised me and I felt that I hadn't lost it all.

Then, with some confidence from that, I went back to something I had tried 12 months before with total failure. I tried to paint some of the experience in the hospital, not as a hospital scene so much as what happened to me following the heart attack. I tried to get an image out that would have some relevance to a sudden and unexpected confrontation with death.

That's a very personal and intimate experience, but is shared by many other people, in one way or another. The Beirut and El Salvador images helped me to paint that. As a result, I made a painting which I regard as one of the most important that I have done. In some ways it is the most original. It disturbs people who look at it. Sometimes it horrifies people because it contains a death image, but not the conventional one. That brought me back into painting.

Some things work on you like acid. Images, things in the news, burn their way into you and that was an example. It shows how complex the image-making processes really are. They take on more flesh and blood the more deeply they are felt within your psyche. There is a big difference between the artistic image and the illustration, the anecdote, no matter how skilful.

You have said in the past that you are never satisfied with repetition, and that is perhaps where you find yourself at odds with those who expect you to repeat your Depression pictures such as "At the Start of the March". In what way are you not repeating yourself today? Are the Beirut and El Salvador images a repetition?

They can have a lot in common without being repetitious. They are seen in new ways, in new terms. One must consider the artistic, the aesthetic evolution. I think they are more complex, more subtle statements than those I have done before.

This is what I am on about — that if in your late sixties you are only doing what you did 30 years earlier then there is something fundamentally wrong. It is stagnation. It means, to use Picasso's term, you are your own mutual admiration society, you think what you have done is pretty good and you keep on doing it. No progress comes out of that.

Why do you say that subtlety and complexity are virtues? Does this not lose some of the impact?

I don't really think so because I think

anything that can be assimilated in a brief look is hollow, superficial. The enduring things in art are very complex and profound. It is amazing that images created three thousand years ago are still found to be moving today. Sculptures and paintings created thousands of years ago can stir the imaginations of people today because there's something that's eternally human in them.

That's what I love about great art. I am impatient with all theories that reduce art to the level of the consumer society. I don't believe in a throw-away art. I believe in permanence and at a time when it is unfashionable to do so, I am a defender of what the impatient young sometimes call high art, which they dismiss as the art of the Establishment, the bourgeoisie. I think that one must learn from works of art which reach over the centuries to touch and move people.

That's like the consolidation of human experience. The artist has found some permanent form for human experience. Aboriginal art, which is thousands of years old, stands up like that and lots of supposedly sophisticated art today won't stand up the same way.

So I have been trying for the latter part of my life to create more complex images, but I try to give them the simplest form. I believe in both simplicity and complexity and think there is a dialectical connection between the two. I am not a lover of obscurity. It pleases me that people can walk in off the street to my exhibition in the National Gallery and feel themselves in touch with a lot of human experience spread out on the walls and have no great difficulty in coming to terms with it. The general experience is that the message comes across very clearly.

But that doesn't deny what I have just said. It simply means that I have been able to find the means of saying rather directly some complex things.

You have said that your last ten years have been your best. In what way?

It flows on from what we have just been talking about. I think my work in artistic terms is on a much higher level. It has taken me decades to work out the ways of saying what I want to say and as I get older I am more and more concerned with the aesthetic problems of my work. Problems of organising colour harmonies, richer harmonies, the problems of colour, problems of the internal energy of the image — all of these things are what it is about.

We have a statement to make about life and it's how to do it in terms of your medium. I'm sure that poets and

composers have the same sort of struggle with the problems within the medium and I find myself more and more concerned with such problems. But I don't believe that this is at the expense of the significance of the image. I think it intensifies the image. The more one can enrich one's art the more the image is likely to communicate and to work on the levels of the imagination. This does not happen in a simple way, but you are more likely to say something that will penetrate people, disturb them and move them.

Over the past few years a number of publications have come out on Australian art. For instance, there was Humphrey McQueen's The Black Swan of Trespass, Richard Haese's book Rebels and Precursors and the Catalogue Raisonné of your own work by Robert Smith. Do you have any thoughts about these books and the controversies they may have generated?

I think they are an expression of a period of aroused interest in the history of Australian art. A new generation is looking at the past in new terms. Many of the most exciting and lively things have happened in my lifetime, since the days of the early Heidelberg and Box Hill schools and I just happened to be around when all sorts of things were fermenting and I took part in them. So that now I have been decked out a bit in terms of history — an historical curio.

It's strange reading the works of a new generation of historians who are writing from an academic point of view about the situations in which we took part and which had such flesh and blood significance for us. We were so deeply involved and now you read a cool appraisal from a remote point of view. I find myself irritated by some of it and sometimes I think the historians are very good.

But it's amazing how an apparently objective writer can still get things cock-eyed. They are not as objective as they think they are. Pure objectivity is unattainable and one gives expression to a conditioned viewpoint.

Your position has often been presented as a kind of war between yourself and the rest of the artistic world. My understanding, however, is that you have a unique position, having had a retrospective exhibition in your own lifetime in 1973 and now, on the occasion of your 70th birthday, another major exhibition in the National Gallery. How do you see this yourself?

The first one was a fairly limited

retrospective, not a complete one, but it was important for me at that stage of life and development. It took place in the face of some considerable opposition from the artistic Establishment, from within the Trustees of the National Gallery for instance. A number of them were opposed to it. But the then director felt it was high time I was paid some recognition.

What plans have you for your work?

I haven't got any big series planned. I am still convalescent and working my way back into painting. I've resisted propositions for exhibitions in the near future because I don't feel up to filling galleries with new work. I'm going about things in a slow sort of way.

Some things are constant in my art. I watched an ABC Spectrum show recently which was devoted to the English sculptor Henry Moore. He came from a mining background and never lost touch with certain aspects of everyday reality. Time and time again he came back to the question that all his imagery was based on the human figure, in particular the female figure. He regarded these as the most important forms in life and everything he did, no matter how abstract it looked, had its roots in the human form.

I find a strong bond of solidarity with him there, because that is exactly how I approach my work. Everything is based on the human face and figure and on relationships between human figures. So that I will go on painting and drawing the human figure, particularly the female figure, until I drop.

Some of the new things I've made this year since resuming painting are based on the female nude, sometimes in relation to a male figure, sometimes just in its own right, and I think they are the best things of their kind that I have done. I couldn't have done them before I was ill — not on this level anyhow.

The illness has left a strange stamp on my work which is hard to pinpoint, but other painters coming here sense it. I show what I have been doing and they say it's different. Now, the subject matter isn't particularly different — the difference is in the work, in the colour harmonies, in the orchestration of the colour, a new richness.

I think it's a fact of life that a profound experience leaves its mark on your psyche and that is what art is about.

Dave Davies is a journalist, humorist and linguist.