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

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 multinational was in effect destroying peasant life and having always been interested in labouring people I thought I would have a good look at an 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 buggied by the constant repetition on TV news of scenes in Beirut of shattered streets with heaps of tattered clothing and one knew that those little heaps were bodys.

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 Haase’s
book Rebels and Precursors and the
Catalogue Raisonne 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 I get 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
language of life leaves its mark on
your psyche and that is what art is
about.

Dave Davies is a journalist, humorist
and linguist.