NOEL COUNIHAN

Robert Smith

Noel Counihan was born on the eve of the Great War; he died recently, some seventy-two years later. Throughout his career as an artist, extending over more than half a century, he produced work consistently dedicated to a humane, committed attitude to the world. Yet his view of the world was not static. Just as life underwent numerous changes, from Depression to war to Cold War and McCarthyism, to new interventionist wars, to a great wave of liberation movements, so Counihan's art developed and changed with the times.

It is important to realise that his work has this internal consistency and continuity as well as development and change, for they are joint indicators of Counihan's artistic and political integrity. In that same period, Western art also went through numerous changes, but they were changes usually defined in purely stylistic terms. One style was succeeded by another in an increasingly formalist cycle which came to be known as "the mainstream" of modern art. Although it is now becoming recognised that European modernism had powerful political origins, from World War II onwards formalist critics increasingly argued that politics and art do not mix, and that art is only "pure" when it is free from politics. Today, we can see that such theories and the art they supported were integral aspects of the Cold War and of rampant consumerism. It hardly seems mere coincidence that art, like other commodities became more and more subject to the rule of the marketplace, with art objects treated as investments, and styles rapidly superseded to prevent over-supply of any one particular kind of product.

These conditions exerted an enormous pressure on artists, no matter how genuine, to conform to the latest supra-national artistic fashions. Part of the attraction of modernism was that artists were able to convince themselves that its emphasis on "formal values" offered them artistic independence, free from the debased moral values of bourgeois utilitarianism. In the name of rejecting false social values, subject matter was devalued, becoming a mere pretext for formal "experiments", or was renounced altogether. The fact that Noel Counihan was responding to events in the wider social context rather than to the isolationist and elitist attitudes of this self-defining "mainstream" of "contemporary art" gave his work a genuine sense of purpose which stimulated its autonomous internal development. This has been the case with all committed artists: Goya in a Spain subject to oppression and obscurantism; Daumier involved in the struggle of the French for republicanism; Kollwitz in a militarist Germany moving towards successive wars and Nazi domination. It is no accident that Counihan saw himself as working in the same humane and realist tradition of which they are part.

The realism practised by such artists is not just a matter of technical skill giving the pictorial illusion of actuality. That rather naive approach can be equated with the art of the chocolate box, and might aptly be called descriptive naturalism to differentiate it from the more incisive and critical type of realism. Realism is not just a question of style either, any more than contemporary art is for that matter. To identify contemporary art or modernism with a particular style or sequence of styles is to trivialise the whole idea of modernity, or of contemporary relevance. As long ago as 1945, Bernard Smith perceptively referred to Noel Counihan as a
“contemporary realist”, making the very valid point that there is no basic conflict between modernity and realism.

"Modernism" is quite a contentious term. If it means anything worthy of note it must refer to meaningful awareness of significant events, conditions and attitudes in the world about us. Counihan was a choirboy in St. Paul’s Anglican Cathedral in Melbourne in the 1920s, and suffered retribution when he had the temerity to protest at the unfair treatment of another member of the choir, whom he considered “a victim of oppression”. So, even before Counihan was influenced by the events and atmosphere of the Depression and the impending war and fascism, he had this propensity for human compassion and social indignation. That, above all, is what is continuous in Noel’s work. It inspired him to help found the Workers Art Club in 1931, to participate in the campaigns of the unemployed against evictions and for freedom of speech and assembly, and it led him to take a leading part in the movement against war and fascism. He was involved in one famous episode which led to legislative moves to curb the excessive power and ambition of Victoria’s Chief Commissioner of Police, Brigadier-General Thomas Blamey (later Australian Commander-in-Chief in World War II). Police had been preventing unemployed protesters in Brunswick from making public speeches by arresting them for allegedly obstructing the traffic. Noel thwarted this police tactic by addressing the public from inside an old lift-cage bolted to the top of a wagon which was padlocked to a shop verandah. The resulting publicity gave rise to the 1933 Street Meetings Act requiring the courts to be satisfied in such cases that there really had been undue obstruction of actual traffic. Robert Gordon Menzies was state Attorney-General at the time, but took no part in debate on the bill, which tends to suggest that he did not share the alarm of his conservative colleagues at Blamey’s apparent attempts to act as a power above the law.

In the light of Noel’s wholehearted involvement in political
activity, it would almost seem unnecessary to discuss the relationship between art and politics in his life, except that the process of artistic creation is widely misunderstood, and especially the production of politically-committed art. Many people of the left (and of the right!) see such art as nothing more than literal illustrations — the kind of treatment which, as in bourgeois naturalist art, produces nothing more than descriptive naturalism, leaving viewers to draw the appropriate conclusions, according to their point of view. Not even in his illustrations to literary works did Counihan lapse into this literal kind of approach. His art is the natural outcome of his profound convictions about life, and not just a translation of his political beliefs into pictorial forms. Rather, his politics and his art both arose from the same source in his compassionate and socially aware nature. The same impulse which motivated him to become an artist led him to join the Communist Party, and he never lost sight of that basic impulse common to both — the impulse towards a better and more equitable world.

In art, Counihan’s themes are always related to social equity, liberation from oppression, and opposition to war. There is constant awareness that these are not just political abstractions, but real issues involving real people, and requiring social action. With specific oppression and specific wars the subject matter varies, and the character of his art changes accordingly. The human figure is usually central because he is concerned about human interests and the human condition. One of Counihan’s great strengths is the superb drawing ability which he nurtured by continually drawing from the model at a time when, under the spell of modernism, drawing, and especially figure drawing, was generally out of artistic fashion. On the basis of such rigorous methods of working, Counihan’s style is derived in a completely organic way from his thematic concerns, and has developed in all sorts of ways to create artistic metaphors for those concerns. Many of the images which welled up in him out of his concern with particular historical situations are not realist in any technical sense. Often they are symbols, but they are symbols which embody profound insights into underlying social realities. At the same time, they usually reveal his consciousness of the continuing causes of human suffering and degradation.

Various motifs recur in Counihan’s work, manifesting themselves in different ways in accordance with specific topical subject matter. In 1931, when he was seventeen or eighteen, he produced his first prints — two linocuts: Tycoon and A Sexless Parson. There is no doubt that these represented, for him, two aspects of institutionalised society, each of them indifferent to the fate of individual human beings. There are recurrent allusions to both throughout his work, often many decades later. When Albert Namatjira died on 8 August 1959, Counihan saw this as martyrdom by the callous institutions of commercial society, and set about creating an allegorical image of Namatjira, choosing the linocut medium with its starkly dramatic graphic potential. A first attempt was rejected, but the definitive version was ready in time for a hand-printed impression to be reproduced with Counihan’s written tribute to Namatjira in the Melbourne Guardian on 27 August. With bitter irony, the mission-reared artist is shown crucified against an impersonal background of the city with its cathedral, symbolising the vested interests of church and corporate capital. Nearly twenty years later, in 1978, similar imagery re-emerged with his awareness of “lots of young unemployed dosing out — a return to the ‘thirties”. The resulting series of drawings and prints include some called City, others called Cathedral, clear references to the continuance of the same indifference there had been to the plight of the unemployed during the Depression, and to the death of Namatjira in 1959.

Some of Counihan’s most powerful works arise from his response to the Viet Nam war, and especially the involvement of young Australian soldiers. In his own words, he was distressed by “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”. Noel depicted these youngsters as simultaneously unwitting aggressors, and victims, dehumanised by the experience. His drawings, paintings and prints carry symbolic undertones of crucifixion, of quasi-phallic potency, and of potential fecundity as a positive counterpart to the defoliation of both the countryside and the young manhood of the intruders. As the other side of the equation he saw the gross individualism and self-indulgence of the mercenary society which sent off its youth to die in unjust wars. This engendered a corresponding series of works on The Good Life, with symbols of moral blindness, physical decadence and social decline. In a related series, The Laughing Christ, a sardonic Christ-figure mocks the depraved ethical values of a society which pays only lip-service to ostensibly Christian standards.

Counihan constantly worked from the particular to the general, so his works stand as great universal images of human suffering, human endurance and human aspiration. In the past five years he had repeated heart attacks and a stroke which made the doctors think he might never work again. Work was very important to him, for he looked on himself as a worker just as much as the workers whose lives and interests he was representing in his art. During his last twelve months or so, sometimes working as little as an hour a day, he produced some really striking images. They reach out with a universal significance. Some of them are to do with what he saw, on the television, of what was happening in Lebanon. But they go beyond that: they work from the particular to a generalised statement about great human issues opposing oppression and opposing war and looking forward to a better kind of real world.

ROBERT SMITH teaches art history at Flinders University in South Australia, and is the author of the standard work on Noel Counihan’s prints.