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Sydney modernism, a recent awakening

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Sydney modernism, a recent awakening

Abstract

It is pleasing to see that there has been recent interest in Sydney modernism from a number of prominent Sydney cultural institutions. The origins of modernism can be traced back to the 1880s, while Sydney modernism has been identified from the early years of the 20th century to the 1960s.

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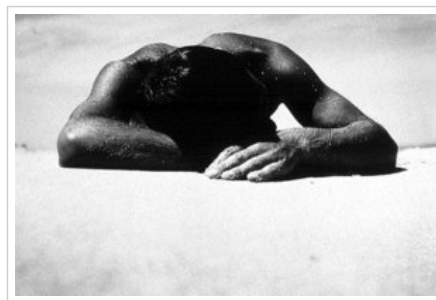
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Sydney modernism, a recent awakening

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It is pleasing to see that there has been recent interest in Sydney modernism from a number of prominent Sydney cultural institutions. The origins of modernism can be traced back to the 1880s, while Sydney modernism has been identified from the early years of the 20th century to the 1960s.



Sunbaker is a 1937 black-and-white photograph by Australian modernist photographer [Max Dupain](#), depicting the head and shoulders of a man lying on a beach, taken from a low angle. (Wikimedia)

In 2008 the Powerhouse Museum organised an exhibition called 'Modern Times: The Untold Story of Modernism in Australia'. The exhibition, for the first time, examined the impact of modernism on Australian culture from 1917 to 1967. The publicity for the exhibition maintained that:

“ Modernism sought to build a better future in the aftermath of World War I. An international movement, modernism encapsulated the possibilities of the 20th century. It celebrated the romance of cities, the healthy body and the ideals of abstraction and functionalism in design.

In 2013 the Art Gallery of New South Wales organised a major exhibition devoted to Sydney modernist artist called 'Sydney Moderns: Art for a New World'. The exhibition spanned the period from 1915 to 1940 and explored the relationship between modern Sydney life and the 'cosmopolitan milieu' of the time. The exhibition included the works of a host of Sydney artists including:

“ Margaret Preston, Roy de Maistre, Roland Wakelin, Grace Cossington Smith, Thea Proctor, Grace Crowley, Ralph Balson, Rah Fizelle, Frank and Margel Hinder, Margo and Gerald Lewers, Dorrit Black, Olive Cotton, Max Dupain and Harold Cazneaux, along with important works by Sydney's lesser known 'lost moderns', such as Tempe Manning, Niel A Gren, Frank Weitzel and Fred Coventry.

The exhibition explored how modernism 'defined a new cosmopolitan culture' and re-shaped life in Sydney.

In 2014 There Was A Photographic Exhibition At The Delmar Gallery In The Sydney Suburb Of Ashfield Called 'Soul Of A City: Modernism And Sydney Photography 1930 – 1950 Olive Cotton, Eo Hoppé, Max Dupain, David Moore, Harold Cazneaux'. The exhibition curator Catherine Benz maintains that 1930s Sydney forged a 'modernist aesthetic inspired by internationalist movements' with photographs that exuded 'sensuality, confidence and optimism'.

In 2014 Sydney Living Museums organised an event at the 2014 Sydney Writers Festival called 'Cultivating Australian Modernism' where a panel discussed the history of the modernist garden. The panel included author Richard Aitken, Sydney Living Museums Assistant Director Ian Innes, and ABC RN's Fenella Kernebone.

In 2015 Sue Williams wrote in the Domain supplement in The Sydney Morning Herald that modernist homes had become 'all the rage'. She maintained that the interest was driven by the TV show Mad Men, post-war classic furniture and the appeal of retro-homewares. These homes were designed by Sydney architects Sydney Ancher, Harry Seidler, Bruce Rickard and Ian McKay, and used simple materials, simple lines and open planned living spaces.

A more recent event is currently showing at the Heide Museum of Modern Art Central Galleries in Bulleen Victoria. The exhibition called 'O'keeffe, Preston, Cossington Smith: Making Modernism' is jointly curated by the Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane, and the Georgia O'Keeffe Museum, Santa Fe and will tour in NSW and Queensland later in 2017. The exhibition curators have brought together

“ for the first time the iconic art of Georgia O’Keeffe, one of America’s most significant painters of the twentieth century, alongside modernist masterpieces by pioneering Australian artists, Margaret Preston and Grace Cossington Smith.

The exhibition explores the

“ similarities and distinctions in their art to bring new perspectives to light about modernism’s dispersal and reinvention as it developed beyond the metropolitan wellspring of Europe.

Modernism and its influence on place making in Sydney has yet to be fully explored by scholars in any meaningful way. It is essential to get a grip on modernism to fully understand its role in the construction of the city’s sense of place and identity.

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