An Involved Artist

J. Cane

"He remembers with bitterness the humiliations of the long dole queue at the Exhibition Building, waiting for two or three hours each fortnight for the restamping of the dole tickets which entitled single men to six shillings worth of food weekly, married men whether they had children or not to eight shillings worth weekly. He remembers the truculent and callous officials and their complete lack of human sympathy. He can never forget the heartless evictions and the outrageous spectacle of women nursing babies in back lanes with their intimate belongings and pitiful items of furniture piled beside them and the children frightened and bewildered by it all, while police occupied their homes to prevent the evicted families regaining possession. He remembers the demonstrations of unemployed outside the offices of estate agents, seeking by peaceful means to stop such evictions. He remembers participating with groups of unemployed in pulling down houses from which families had been evicted forcefully in the face of protest. He remembers the numerous meetings of unemployed workers at which he was a speaker ...."

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Early memories of the Australian painter Noel Counihan from page 21 of the book Noel Counihan by Max Dimmock, published by the Melbourne University Press.
Top left: "Legislative Council Guardian. Below left: "The Tight One"
Top right: "Waterside Worker"
"Mikis Theodorakis", chalk."
"cartoon for the Rope", oil painting. chalk. Below right:
This book, in presentation and production, is of comparable quality to any of the other large hand bound art books overflowing from bookshops. The text is informative and interesting, not often the case with those expensive art books. It is also effectively presented on brown tinted paper. The reproductions are good and represent a wide range of Noel Counihan's work. There are a large number in color, which is not always the case with such books. The layout is tastefully done, making it pleasant to handle and easy to look at. Placed on a coffee table with the usual array of glossy books, it would demand attention and compete quite well with the endless Boyds, Pughs, Nolans and Percevals, so the casual visitor might be rather alarmed, when expecting some pleasant visual distraction, to be flung back to the suffering and unemployment of the 1930 depression in Australia. Noel Counihan didn’t paint about painting, he painted about people. Besides pictures drawn from this period, his themes include portraits of wharfies, Aborigines, whores, pensioners, business tycoons and political cartoons. All executed in an honest, uncompromising and graphic style.

Noel Counihan was born in 1913 in Albert Park, Melbourne. His father, at first a shop assistant, later became a commercial traveller selling women’s hosiery and lingerie. Right from the beginning, his life was one of conflict. At school he was always in trouble and showed no liking for formal learning. At the age of eight Noel was pounced upon and packed off to St. Paul’s Cathedral as a choir boy, and naturally rebelled. He grew to despise his father who became an alcoholic and ill-treated his mother. Eventually, he left school and became an office boy at one pound per week and started part-time drawing classes. In 1931 he discovered Marxism, Atheism and Modern Art. He became involved in protest demonstrations of the unemployed and their right of free speech against suppression by the police. It was at this time that he addressed a large crowd from a cage made from an old steel lift bolted to the back of a truck to defy police attempts to move them on. It was 25 minutes before the cage was broken open and he was arrested.

During 1935-36, Noel Counihan travelled around New South Wales with a writer friend, Judah Waten, making a modest living selling pencil portraits of the local dignitaries in country towns. Activities in the 1939-40 anti-conscription movement resulted in his arrest and deportation from New Zealand. Eventually when the war broke out he actively supported the war effort. He began painting only after a rest in a Sanatorium near Melbourne while recovering from tuberculosis in 1941. He then began an intense period of self education, teaching himself to paint and refining his concepts of what he wanted to express. These are just a few instances from Noel Counihan’s active and eventful life. He was not a mere studio painter, but tightly inter-related his lifestyle and work. This is, of course, where his images draw their strength - he did experience the emotions he was painting.

His work speaks for itself. I have been greatly impressed and encouraged by it. I don’t think there is any value in debating aesthetics or dwelling upon the merits of any specific painting - this would do these pictures a grave injustice - you must see them.

However, there is another aspect of special interest revealed by this book. That is how Noel Counihan dealt with the contradiction between his active marxist politics and his recognition as an Australian painter by the establishment. Intertwined with this is the ability of the conservative art world to absorb, redefine and render harmless any work of real political strength.

The main impetus of the ‘art world’ is geared toward rendering painting neutral and politically safe. By doing this it can be made either to serve the interests of the ruling establishment or at least not threaten it. Consequently, the role of painting has been reduced to that of a purely visual sensation. Color for the sake of color, line for the sake of line, paint for the sake of paint. In all, a rather low key hedonist experience. Just another pleasant physical sensation for those who have learnt to enjoy this experience. The whole event of visiting an exhibition remains no more memorable or meaningful than eating a large bag of marshmallows. Astute art dealers can make money buying and selling on the market they create. The culture-hungry affluent can be convinced that in this expensive, wine-sipping atmosphere of trendy people that the mud pie they bought is real ART. Various fashionable styles are adopted and dropped overnight along with their painters as ‘new movements’ come and go. Artists are promoted and paraded like pop stars. ‘Names’ are bought and sold. Glossy art
magazines are published. The ordinary person walking in on this world is intimidated by the ritual and jargon ..... I could ramble for pages describing this plastic world, but the point is that within it are meaningless and castrated pictures. It is against this insidious backdrop that the emergence and survival of Noel Counihan becomes even more significant.

The whole process of containing the potential power of pictures begins the first day the student lifts his or her brush. Facile limitations of accepted styles are smiled upon. The best carbon copy of the latest so-called 'international trend' is acclaimed. 'Abstract Expressionism' was once the avant-garde; this gave way to 'pop' and 'op' and the more sophisticated were doing 'color field' work. Each new fad defined the last as old-fashioned. This whole sideshow is usually rationalised with 'history of art' lectures. These are generally built around the idea that ART has its own reality and can be viewed as an isolated process unrelated to social and economic forces. From this position it is deduced that 'art and politics don't mix', rather a cherished piece of dogma. It is then shown that political commitment for a painter is dangerous as this will corrupt any work produced and reduce it to mere propaganda. A close look at Counihan's work and life will reveal the stupidity of this argument. In fact, it rather shows that a painter's preoccupation with formal elements tends to result in rather trite works.

However, if the radical persists and cannot be 'neutralised' there are some in-built...
mechanisms to cope with her or him, the most effective being the myth of the painter as the 'eccentric' or 'bohemian'. People are taught to expect the views of a painter to be slightly outrageous and are disappointed when they are not. Consequently the dissident can be more easily accommodated.

The Art Establishment has the ability to absorb many attacks made directly upon it. An obvious example being that of the DADA movement. This group rubbed the very notion of ART. Now, their whole position has been defined as ANTI-ART and is happily incorporated in the very establishment they opposed. Lectures are given at Art Schools on the subject. Art galleries now eagerly seek to exhibit the now rare Dada pieces which are proudly displayed and heavily guarded. Another more recent assault upon ART has been made with POST-OBJECT ART. This is an attempt to liberate the holy essence ART from the object so it can't be captured by institutions. However, already professors of fine art are championing the movement at universities, and galleries are giving POST-OBJECT displays. In many respects, the motivation of these groups is worthy of sympathy for they were often attempts to reveal social hypocrisy and shallowness. Because of the nature of their attack they became lost in the internal art world debate, they failed to transcend the situation and relate to a larger number of people, remaining another esoteric group. Here we can draw important lessons from Noel Counihan's work. He showed continual development, being open to many influences, but wise enough not to become distracted and imitate transitory fashions. This single-minded approach has given his work a quality that, in retrospect, is lacking among his more fashionable contemporaries.

A part of the struggle to develop as a painter while holding marxist views is to resist the rather simplistic solution put forward by certain sections of the left. 'Art must serve the people' is a favourite slogan of the maoists. This is interpreted as any art of the pictorial illustrative nature, heavily imbued with their own 'correct' politics as fulfilling this function. Lim Mo-Han one of the officials responsible for culture in the Chinese People's Republic in 1961 wrote “Let us raise still higher the banner of Mao Tse-tung's thought over literature and art ..... the present task for writers and artists is to develop and create a socialist literature and art in conformity with the directives set out by comrade Mao Tse-tung”, and the obvious conclusion to this is "literature and art, which make up a part of the whole revolutionary cause, must naturally accept the Party's direction and control". The official pictorial art of China has failed to relate to the mass of the people and remains the product of the party. It is interesting to note that the traditional painting of China still remains the most popular among the people. The bureaucratic approach was imported directly from the stalinist model. The example of social realism in Russia has been tragic. The Russian Zhdanov said in 1946 that it was necessary to "align all the sections of our work to the ideological front". The consequence was that all cultural debate, all possibility of contestation, all ideological struggle was suppressed. In brief, the opposite to marxism. The paintings resulting from this were a sterile failure but are still tediously reproduced in Party publications. It is rather curious that dissident painters in Moscow recently were engaged in a struggle to exhibit abstract expressionism, now considered 'old-fashioned' by western artists.

However, within the marxist tradition there are more sophisticated approaches to the problem. Here the work of Gramsci is of special interest. From prison he wrote "the politician exerts pressure to make of the art of his time a given cultural world. This is a political activity, not an artistic critique. If the cultural world for which we are struggling is a living and imperative reality, its expression will be irresistible. It will find its own artists. If, in spite of political pressure, it does not find its own artists, this means we are dealing with a factitious cultural world, a pastiche, a paper lucubration by mediocrities ....". This view which finally ceases to consider art simply as an ideological superstructure and as a utilitarian instrument unfortunately has been overshadowed by naive sloganeering. It is also a credit to Noel Counihan that he, unlike many other painters, managed to support the left yet escaped the narrow restrictions it often imposed upon its painters.

I hope the supporters of the left will take more interest in Noel Counihan's work and defend it from attacks made by the conservative art world. I think already its own inherent strength has safeguarded it effectively. May a Counihan picture never safely adorn the walls of a stockbroker's office.