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more and more subject to the rule of the marketplace, with art objects treated as investments, and styles rapidly superseded to prevent over-supply of any one particular kind of product.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 republican democracy; 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. 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 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 dossing 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
deprecated 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.