



ARTHUR BOYD 1920-1999

Arthur Merrie Bloomfield Boyd, the most highly esteemed Australian artist of his generation, was born in Melbourne on 24 July 1920 and died there on 24 April 1990. Both his grandparents, Arthur Merrie Boyd (1862-1940) and Emma Merrie Boyd (*nee* a Beckett) were painters. His father Merrie (1888-1959) was one of the first Australian studio potters and also an artist, as was his mother, Doris (*nee* Gough). One of his uncles, Penleigh Boyd, (1890-1923) was a landscape painter and an etcher, and another uncle, Martin Boyd (1893-1972), a distinguished novelist. His cousin Robin Boyd (1919-1971), the son of Penleigh, was a highly original architect and architectural critic. Arthur's brother, David (b.1924) is a distinguished painter and potter. His other brother, Guy (1923-1988), was a notable sculptor. Arthur grew up in a family environment in which art was regarded not as an industry but a calling.

His father Merrie set up the family home and pottery workshop in a rambling house and garden in Murrumbeena, an outer Melbourne suburb in the 1920s. Both parents were devout Christians. In the home, as Franz Philipp his biographer put it, 'an intimate spiritual climate prevailed, best described as Blakeian'.

At the age of sixteen Arthur went to live with his grandfather at Rosebud on the Mornington Peninsula and there produced his first paintings, now known as the 'peninsula landscapes'; in a painterly, impressionist style. By 1938, a dark element begins to appear in his work, in a group of grotesque heads, painted after reading *The Brothers Karamazov*. To the redeeming pastoralism of landscape painting, he thus adjoined a meta-physical fatalism about the nature of the human condition. These alternating strands persisted in his art throughout life.

The darker strand was quickened by Yosl Bergner, a young migrant artist who brought tragic memories of Poland to Australia. World War II fostered the darkness. It turned Boyd, as it turned so many, from being a traditional Australian landscape painter into a twentieth-century artist.

In 1940 he was conscripted into the army and later detailed to the survey corps. Here he met John Perceval, his future brother-in-law. Army life

left time to paint and from 1940 to 1945 he completed a series, the so-called 'South Melbourne' paintings, highly expressionistic and influenced by surrealism, which he himself described as 'psychological or poetic fantasies'. In 1945 he married Yvonne Lennie, a former student and prize-winner at the National Gallery of Victoria Art School and the following year, in collaboration with Perceval and Peter Herbst, a student of philosophy, he was able to leave the Anny and set up the Murrumbidgee Potteries. The pots, tiles and other ceramics provided an economic base for the less remunerative aspects of their artistry.

Reproductions in books in the State Library of Victoria provided Boyd and Perceval with knowledge of the art of Bosch, Brueghel and Rembrandt. During the mid-1940s, this stimulated a magnificent series of paintings based on biblical themes, including such memorable masterpieces as 'The Mockers' (1945). The paintings were related to local urban and rural landscape settings, thus giving regional colour to Boyd's universalising vision. They began to establish his reputation among discriminating connoisseurs. Here was a new, original, Australian artist.

One of the first to appreciate his talent was his uncle, Martin Boyd, who returned to Melbourne in 1948 after an absence of twenty-seven years and, after acquiring 'The Grange', formerly an old family home of the Becketts at Harkaway, near Berwick, commissioned Arthur to paint murals around the walls of the dining room. During 1948-9 he lived there with his wife and young family, Polly (b.1946) and Jamie (b.1948) and, while painting the murals, turned his attention once again to landscape, now painting mostly in tempera. In 1950 he began a series of paintings of the open wheat and sheep country of the Wimmera. The exquisite patina of their pearly surfaces widened the appeal of his art considerably, for they evoked a peaceful, redemptive vision after the ethical intensities of the post-war Biblical paintings. But the metaphysical darkness of those earlier works was not abandoned. His interest in grand Biblical narratives moved instead during the 1950s, into tiles and fine ceramic sculpture such as 'Saul and David' (1952-53). This phase culminated in an ambitious, but not wholly successful 'totem' pole, commissioned by the architects of the new swimming pool for the 1956 Melbourne Olympics.

In 1951 Boyd spent a few weeks in the Centre, in Alice Springs and Arltunga, making notes and drawings. But it was not until 1955 that he began painting his 'Love, Marriage and Death of a Half-Caste', or 'Bride series' as they came to be called. Though not so intended, it questioned profoundly the assumptions of racial supremacy built into our Federal legislation. Sexuality had already figured prominently in Boyd's art from

the time of the 'South Melbourne' paintings of 1944, but now the sexual and racial issues produced a volatile mix that was not accepted readily by the art community. Boyd was revealing that he could handle the existential limits of his aesthetic repertoire, the lyrical and the tragic, with authority. The 'Bride series', was first exhibited as 'Allegorical Paintings' in 1958 at the Australian Galleries, Collingwood. Although they were coolly received in some quarters, they did not affect the standing that Boyd had already achieved in Australian art. Later that year some of his landscapes, together with others by Sir Arthur Streeton, were chosen to represent Australia at the 1958 Venice Biennale.

Though a quiet man not given to rhetoric, Boyd's 'Bride' paintings revealed an artist of considerable moral courage ready to face unpopular reaction. Early in 1959 he joined with me and his brother David, together with five other artists, Charles Blackman, John Brack, Robert Dickerson, John Perceval and Clifton Pugh in the preparation of a manifesto and exhibition that we called the *Antipodeans* and held in the Victorian Artists' Societies Galleries, Melbourne, in August 1959. Boyd displayed six paintings from the 'Bride' series. The *Antipodean Manifesto*, published in the catalogue, was written to challenge the then high fashion for abstract art being trumpeted about by critics as the only acceptable form and possible future for modern painting-so defending a pluralist position.

In November 1959, with financial assistance from Thomas Purves of the Australian Galleries, Boyd mortgaged his house in Beaumaris and departed with his family for London. Settling in Highgate he continued to work on the 'Bride series', exhibiting them at the Zwemmer Gallery, London, in July 1960. The catalogue included an introduction by Bryan Robertson, the influential director of the Whitechapel Art Gallery. It was well received, and Robertson included two of his works in the highly influential exhibition of 'Recent Australian Painting', held at Whitechapel in June 1961, that introduced Britain to twentieth-century Australian art.

Boyd was highly experimental as a craftsman, moving constantly from his central concern with painting to other media, finding it essential to develop alternative techniques in order to avoid creative fatigue. In London, during the earlier 1960s, he turned to graphics (etching, aquatint and dry point) and then to ceramic tiling, a venture that culminated in one of his minor masterpieces, the *Romeo and Juliet Polyptych*, for the Shakespeare Exhibition held at Stratford, Edinburgh and London during 1963-64. There followed prestigious stage commissions, sets and costumes for Stravinsky's *Renard the Fox* at the 1961 Edinburgh

Festival, and Robert Helpmann's production of *Electra* in London.

Before he left for London, Boyd met T.S.R. Boase, then President of Magdalen College, Oxford, a medievalist and art historian, while he was on a brief visit to Melbourne in 1956. Boase was excited by what he saw in Arthur's Beaumaris studio and after he moved to London, they became good friends. Following a visit Arthur and Yvonne made to Umbria in 1964 the story of St Francis began, as Ursula Hoff has put it, 'to engage his imagination'. Boase had published a life of St Francis in 1934, and after reading it Boyd created a series of pastels around the St Francis story that he turned later into lithographs which were used to illustrate a new edition in 1968. Then, following a visit to the Portalegre tapestry workshop in Portugal, Boyd commissioned a series of tapestries based on the St Francis pastels. His next venture, and one of the high points of his oeuvre, was a magnificent series of allegorical paintings built around the biblical story of Nebuchadnezzar, King of Babylon. Some were later published in 1972, with the biblical text provided by Boase.

After nine years abroad the Boyds returned to Australia in 1968 and exhibited Nebuchadnezzar paintings at the Adelaide festival, and a series known as the 'Potter' paintings, created in homage to his parents. There followed, in 1971, another series, later transformed into etchings, inspired by Aristophanes' *Lysistrata*.

Returning to Australia again in 1971, to take up a Creative Arts Fellowship at the Australian National University, Boyd visited Bundanon on the Shoalhaven River in New South Wales, as the guest of Frank McDonald, his Sydney dealer. There he began his long series of Shoalhaven paintings, and later purchased Riversdale, a property near Bundanon. Back in England in 1972 he bought a cottage near Woodridge, in Suffolk, and began a series of landscapes somewhat reminiscent of the Constable country. Then his work began to swing once again from lyric to tragic, in this case to personal unease. In a series of paintings that reaches a peak in 'Chained Figure and Bent Tree' (1972-73) Boyd presents himself as the artist 'trapped in a world which is irreducibly carnal and bestial', as Patrick McCaughey aptly put it, 'driven by uncontrollable forces of fantasy and worried lest he appears engaged in his art for material gain', to quote Ursula Hoff. Perhaps such misgivings were at the source of his decision, in 1975, to present about 3000 of his works to the National Gallery of Australia, Canberra. It included pastels, sculpture, ceramics, etchings, tapestries, paintings and over 200 drawings: virtually the whole of the work he still possessed at the time. It was something of a personal kenosis and was followed by a series of works, sure enough, on the theme

of Narcissus.

By 1980 Boyd was being taken up as a 'national icon': an AO in 1979, was followed by work for a tapestry for the reception hall of the new Parliament House in Canberra. A major retrospective in the National Gallery of Australia followed in 1985 and he represented Australia at the 43rd Venice Biennale in 1988. In 1993, after years of negotiation the Federal Government accepted the gift of his Bundanon property on behalf of the nation, as a place where artists might come and work and renew contact with the natural world. It included thousands of works from five generations of the Boyd family as well as other artists. In 1995 the Prime Minister, Paul Keating, announced him as the Australian of the Year.

Nevertheless, all his life Boyd sought to transcend nationalism and even aesthetics, placing, as Patrick McCaughey put it: 'the urgency of his vision before aesthetic considerations'. In his essay on Delacroix, Baudelaire makes a distinction between a good painter and a great painter: 'Just as a good knowledge of the dictionary does not necessarily imply a knowledge of the art of composition, and the art of composition itself does not imply the gift of universal imagination, so a good painter may well not be a great painter, but a great painter is necessarily a skilled painter, because a universal imagination comprises the understanding of all technical means and the desire to acquire them'.

Arthur Boyd, driven by an ethical imperative acquired in childhood, sought throughout life to develop the skills that made him a good artist while cultivating a universalising vision that sought to transcend both national and aesthetic limitations.

B W Smith

Photo: Arthur Boyd taken in his studio 1962

Photographer: Axel Poignant

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