



Editor Benjamin Genocchio

THE ART OF PERSUASION

Australian Art Criticism 1950–2001



CRAFTSMAN HOUSE

A Craftsman House Book
Fine Art Publishing Pty Ltd
42 Chandos Street
St Leonards, Sydney NSW 2065
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ISBN 1 877004 11 1

Design: Jessica Cotterell
Printing: Tien Wah Press, Singapore



This project has been assisted by the Commonwealth Government through the Australia Council, its arts funding and advisory body.

FRONTISPIECE

Robert Rooney, *Cowboy Joe from Mexico*, 2002,
acrylic on canvas, 145 x 132 cm.
Courtesy the artist and Tolarno Galleries, Melbourne

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How the West was Won Over

Weekend Australian, 2–3 October 2000

Robert Juniper is the one contemporary artist every West Australian knows, even if only through his appearances on television commercials in which he sells the State's electricity provider, Western Power. For five decades, his imposing figure, clad in black and adorned with his signature hat, silver belt buckle, medallion and cowboy boots, has stood, colossus-like, astride the local art scene. As the quintessential artist, he has ruled on high from his home and studio in Darlington, a small village nestled into the Darling Scarp, east of Perth, descending regularly to accept awards such as the Rubinstein Portrait Prize, the Wynne Prize and an honorary doctorate of letters from the University of Western Australia. This year, he was elevated to the status of Living Cultural Treasure by the State Government.

Despite this eminent position, the full scope of his work is not as well known as you might imagine. For many West Australians it is limited to a few key paintings – such as *Outcamp*, 1977 – that hang in the Art Gallery of Western Australia. Widely reproduced, this painting epitomises the local landscape for those who have not visited the desert or travelled off the main roads linking the main centres of habitation in this vast state.

Juniper has become synonymous with art, landscape and culture in this community, so why is it that, after a career spanning five decades, the Art Gallery of Western Australia has not offered him a significant exhibition until now? Is he the victim of his fame, an artist better known for being an artist than for the work he produces? Perhaps his success has generated resentment, and his abiding presence and extraordinary productivity are read as a kind of journeyman-activity lacking innovation? Whatever the reasons, the retrospective to celebrate his 70th birthday is a long overdue acknowledgment of a singularly important figure. The show has been on the backburner for the past ten years or more, with several curators making a start before Trevor Smith finally brought it to life. Its tortuous evolution is perhaps another indication of the difficulty faced by the local community when confronted with the Juniper phenomenon.

Born in Western Australia and trained as a commercial artist at Beckenham School of Art in Kent, after his family returned to the United Kingdom, Juniper returned to Perth in 1949, where he was encouraged by local artists to develop his talent for painting. In a small community, encouragement was forthcoming from artists such as John Lunghi and Elise Blumann, from Salek Minc, a local collector, and Laurie Thomas, newly appointed director of the Western Australian Art Gallery, as it was then known. This mentoring was never forgotten and Juniper, too, has been an important role model, supporter and adviser for young artists.

Perth in the 1950s was just beginning to stir after a long cultural hibernation that had begun in the 1930s. Coffee shops and art galleries opened up to a small but eager clientele, who enthusiastically swarmed to exhibitions such as the now famous 'French Painting Today' and 'Italian Art', which arrived in 1953 and 1956 respectively. The impact of these shows on Juniper's work was immediate. He was like a magpie, picking up influences from everywhere and bringing them together with impeccable skill into his images of Perth suburban life. *Greek Orthodox Cathedral* and *The Bar at the Palace Hotel* reflect Ben Nicholson's hard, defining line; *Shacks* borrowed from the fragmented surfaces of Maria Elena Vieira da Silva; *The Seedling* from Sam Fullbrook; and *The Bridge* pays homage to Andre Marchand.

One artist whose importance has never waned as a source of inspiration since the 1940s has been Paul Klee. Early works, such as *St Xavier's Thorn and Fetish*, 1954, and *Last Supper, Lord is it I?*, 1958, are direct homages to Klee and lay the foundation for Juniper's now familiar treatment of the local landscape as a textured field enlivened with finely wrought visual incidents such as a leaf, a bird or the traces of human habitation.

The passage from suburban chronicler to quintessential landscape painter was difficult, but the example of his mentors from those visiting exhibitions and from reproductions in art books, combined with his experience of the local terrain, moved him away from the delicate colouration and urban themes to document the desert landscape on our doorstep. *Image of Kal: Winter*, 1959, is a bold work that responds to the gestural abstractionists included in those touring exhibitions while retaining the linear superstructure he had developed from da Silva, among others. The landscape is distilled down to a series of marks within a field, held together by the play of colour and texture.

By 1962, in works such as *Dancers on a Wall*, his treatment of the landscape had become more refined, with the gestural marks replaced by finely wrought surfaces embedded with images and set within an atmospheric field similar to that employed by Paris-based Chinese artist Zao Wou Ki. The continuous field merging sky and land, and containing symbolic representations of figures, foliage and the remains of human interaction with the land, became the defining image of Western Australia for many of its citizens. It is not surprising that his popularity is based on these few works because they are very beautiful; they are also distanced and empty, allowing the viewer to take their place within this seductive space. Despite their subject matter, which suggests the danger of bushfires, floods and the encompassing vastness of the land, they remain beguiling and unthreatening images.

Although they don't address social issues or challenge well-established perceptions about our tenure of the western half of the continent, or our place within the world at large, these works have helped white Australians to accept the strangeness and harshness of the local environment, and to see beauty in the curling shapes of eucalyptus leaves and encrustations of dried earth. This is a valuable contribution that is too easily disparaged.

Juniper's ability to move across media has also spawned detractors, who feel more comfortable when artists stay within definable boundaries. He is a gifted book illustrator and designer for the theatre, a person who moves easily from stained glass to fabric – and he makes sculptures.

One of the most engaging stories in the catalogue is by Tim Burns, a former student, who recalls the trips to the quarry with sticks of gelnite and sheets of steel, which Juniper would blow up to shape into organic forms for his large public sculptures. Juniper myths and stories abound and this show will likely generate more, but it also provides an opportunity to deal with the work, not just the myth. Juniper's preeminent position on the West Australian art scene has made it difficult to assess his contribution but, thanks to Smith's judicious selection and his perceptive catalogue essay, we are given new insights into this important figure.

SASHA GRISHIN

Hallmark of the Great

Canberra Times, 20 February 1999

When Emily Kame Kngwarreye died in 1996, believed to be aged in her mid-80s, she was one of Australia's most famous and most highly acclaimed artists. Emily's career path was completely different from that of her non-Indigenous contemporaries such as Nolan and Boyd. Although all three artists were prolific, with an oeuvre that ran into thousands, Nolan's and Boyd's output was spread over a lifetime. Emily produced an estimated 3000 works over eight exceptionally compressed years.

Perhaps the first and most lasting impression of this major retrospective exhibition is its sense of urgency and the quality of compressed excitement. The exhibition comes to Canberra a year after it began its national tour at the Queensland Art Gallery in Brisbane in February last year. It has also been seen at the Art Gallery of New South Wales and at the National Gallery of Victoria. The National Gallery in Canberra is its final venue, so it is really the last opportunity to see this remarkable exhibition.

While I did not see the exhibition in Brisbane – where I understand most of the downstairs gallery was devoted to it and it was staged in homage to the artist and was free to the public – the Canberra hang is more effective and spectacular than that in either Melbourne or Sydney. A spacious freedom prevails throughout the exhibition and the paintings gain a sense of grandeur and power. The exhibition comprises 89 works (consisting of 192 pieces), with six early batiks from 1981 to 1988, made before she began painting, and paintings from 1989 to 1996, the year of her death.

The centrepieces of the exhibition are the 22-panel Canberra *Alhalkere Suite* and the 18-piece *Utopia Panels* from the Queensland Art Gallery. When this artist's oeuvre is assembled as a single body of work, the effect is overwhelming. There is a sense of a dramatic progression as the viewer moves from the festive batik works to the veils of colour dots, which characterised Emily's move into painting in 1989, and then into the late polyphony with the diversity of the formal means of expression in the work of her final years. While some commentators argue that the acceptance of the artist's work in Australia was largely the result of its similarities with that of the American and Australian abstract expressionists, the evidence presented in the exhibition prompts an alternative conclusion. Emily in her paintings achieves a powerful spiritual expression, a spiritual intensity which cannot be given a verbal equivalent.

Its source may well lie in her land and its sacred iconography. In her much-quoted pronouncement on art, she said that Alhalkere was her only subject: 'Whole lot, that's whole lot; Awelye [my dreaming], Arlateye [pencil yam], Ankerrthe [mountain devil lizard], Ntange [grass seed], Tingu [a Dreamtime pup], Ankerre [emu], Intekwe [a favourite food of emus, a small plant], Atnwerle [green bean] and Kame [yam seed]. That's what I paint: whole lot ...' At its most basic level the exhibition is a reiteration of the sacred cause of Aboriginal land rights. However, we read her paintings not through decoding the imagery, as with Papunya painting or the Arnhem Land barks, but as an overall experience. This is one of the most traditional ways of making art and perceiving art – there is absolutely nothing that Emily could have learnt from Pollock, Tuckson or Motherwell, nor they from her. They may be to some extent fellow travellers, but they are travelling worlds apart.

If one abandons a reading of Emily's work in terms of parallels and influences with non-indigenous Australian art then her placement and ranking within a Western European art hierarchy becomes increasingly problematic. Also, we cannot satisfactorily interpret her art as a sort of glorified illustrated autobiography, a favourite strategy for artists like Van Gogh. This is frustrated by our lack of knowledge of her life and our general lack of familiarity with the conventions of her community. We are called upon to confront the work itself in its naked intensity and spiritual purity.

It is difficult to leave this exhibition without feeling deeply moved. The viewer feels (or at least this viewer felt) that he or she has participated in a significant experience, one which cannot fail to leave a profound impression. Surely this is the hallmark of a great artist. If you have not seen this exhibition, do not miss it. If you have seen it before, then you will come back to see it again.