

Crossing cultures

A new orthodoxy for Australian art

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THE CAMBRIDGE COMPANION TO AUSTRALIAN ART

edited by Jaynie Anderson

Cambridge University Press, \$120 pb, 390 pp, 9781107601581

Bernard Smith, who died in September 2011, was responsible for creating the first orthodoxy in Australian art history. His version of the story of Australian art has been persuasive and enduring. It held sway for half a century; in many ways we are still living with it. Smith's classic account of the development of Australian art was *Australian Painting*, first published in 1962 and reprinted with updates in 1971, 1991, and 2001.

Smith's central preoccupation in *Australian Painting* was 'to clarify the Australian tradition' and to set it in the context of the European tradition. Aboriginal art was not included as part of the story until the 1991 edition of the book, when additional chapters by Terry Smith focused on what its original author described as 'a relatively independent and self-sustaining tradition within Australian painting'.

A month after the death of Bernard Smith came the launch of *The Cambridge Companion to Australian Art*. The book marks the maturity of a new orthodoxy for Australian art. You will not find the word 'tradition' much in the *Companion*. The word now has an old-fashioned sound, the echo of intellectual preoccupations of an earlier generation. Yet, in a sense, the new orthodoxy in Australian art history is concerned precisely with the interplay of traditions. Now, however, the interest is less in the cultural connections of Europe and Australia, and more in the interplay of Indigenous and non-Indigenous art traditions, as well as Australian and Asian ones. The new orthodoxy is encapsulated in the phrase 'cross-cultural'. Introducing the *Companion*, editor Jaynie Anderson de-

scribes it as 'a series of interconnecting essays on cross-cultural experiences in Australian art, or what happens when the art of one culture encounters that of another'. The key figures of interest are the artists about whom cross-cultural stories can be told: Margaret Preston, Tony Tuckson, Imants Tillers, Albert Namatjira, Uta Uta Tjangala. The names of these artists crop up in several of the essays in the volume.

As its title suggests, the *Companion* is not intended to be an exhaustive account of its subject. Even so, a question arises: can a series of essays about 'the cross-cultural experience' encapsulate enough material for the volume to live up to the *Australian Art* part of its title? I don't think it can, and for this reason we have to distinguish between those essays in the volume that have the 'cross-cultural experience' at their core and those essays that appear to have been grafted in, to fill out areas of Australian art that otherwise would have been overlooked in a volume with a particular thematic preoccupation. These fillers or bridging chapters are the least satisfying parts of the *Companion*, in which authors repeat or repackage their elsewhere published research or generalisations.

The best essays in the *Companion* are those that have genuinely taken the cross-cultural experience as a subject matter or methodological challenge. One essay in particular takes the idea of cross-cultural approach as having serious methodological consequences: the chapter by Philip Jones, entitled 'The Art of Contact: Encountering an Aboriginal Aesthetic from the Eighteenth to the Twentieth Centuries'.

Jones turns his cool, intelligent eye on the shifting assumptions and ideas and the 'low temperature of enquiry' that have informed the way in which Aboriginal art is discussed and understood. He makes a convincing case for his proposition that 'the greatest advances in understanding and analysing Aboriginal art have come from anthropologists documenting the social bases and discrete circumstances of the art's production, rather than from art curators, who have been, as a rule, more concerned with the art's subsequent visual impact and its universal qualities'.

Indeed, anthropologists (if we want to confine writers within disciplinary constraints) are responsible for the best parts of the *Companion*. Howard Morphy, looking at the reception of Aboriginal art in the 1960s, does not confine himself to the art historian's interest in visual influence, but examines the consequences of cross-cultural exchange in the areas of intellectual property and rights. Another anthropologist, John Carty, has teamed up with Alison French to produce another fine chapter, on the specific circumstances that led to the development of the Arrarnta watercolourists and the related but different workers at Balgo. These histories challenge received art-historical accounts of the development of Aboriginal art centres. The authors conclude that 'each school of desert painting has its own origin myth which truncates, for local artists and their audiences, more complex histories into definitive beginnings'. It is an idea that echoes Jones's diagnosis of the tendency of discourse about Aboriginal art to simplify and reduce. But, of course, when one thinks about it, *origin myths* have been a problem for art history for a very long time – we prefer the easier stories of creative invention to the more complex and less dramatic versions.

The Cambridge Companion to Australian Art is dedicated to Daniel Thomas, has an introduction by Ron Radford, and includes an essay by Gerard Vaughan. The prominent inclusion of three leading figures in the administration of Australian art museums – curators and directors – points to



Rosemary Laing, *welcome to Australia*, 2004, Type C photograph, 110 x 224 cm, image courtesy the artist and Tolarno Galleries, Melbourne

a recognition of the contribution of cultural institutions to the creation of art histories. Thomas's great contributions to art-historical understanding were his installation of the Australian galleries of the Art Gallery of New South Wales and the National Gallery of Australia, as well as the series of exhibitions in which he introduced a wider public to artists who are now considered canonical. In these arenas, Thomas's impact was probably far greater than that of any writer in shaping public perceptions of main stylistic contours of Australian art.

Gerard Vaughan's essay is one of the longest pieces in the *Companion*. He charts the rise of the 'cross-cultural art museum' in Australia, though it is more precisely a history of the diminishing Eurocentrism of our public institutions. Vaughan's canvas is huge, because he has to look not only at the inclusions of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures in state and national galleries, but also at the history of Asian art in these same institutions – an equally complex story.

The recognition of the shaping role of art museums in art history is a major change in the way we see art history in Australia, confirmed by the *Companion*.

Art history is never made by artists, scholars, and critics alone; it is also made by curators and dealers. The *Companion* acknowledges this latter point in its inclusion of a sketch of the Australian art market from European settlement to the present.

The cross-cultural experience should have a tendency to corrode, if not destroy altogether, the medium-based categories into which the field of art history has traditionally been divided. Yet the *Companion* remains for the most part in the thrall of these categories. For example, there are chapters on photography and printmaking and new media art. If Philip Jones is right in his view that we can come to a fuller understanding of Aboriginal art only by seeing it in a wider cultural context, then the same would hold true of the whole field of Australian art. This is what Daniel Thomas understood when he created integrated displays of Australian art for the National Gallery of Australia. In those displays he attempted to demonstrate the interconnectedness of stylistic and subject preoccupations across mediums. In the *Companion*, an important dimension of that context is missing – the relationship of Australian art to design and architecture.

The decorative arts are almost entirely absent. Tellingly, I couldn't find a single reference (perhaps there is one – not indexed) to the work of Joan Kerr, an art historian who spent a lifetime widening the field of Australian art history to encompass areas such as the decorative arts and black-and-white illustration.

Ultimately, cross-cultural experience, like the feminism that informed Kerr's work, will challenge the boundaries and methodology of the field of art history. At this particular point in the development of the discipline in Australia, it is possible to see where these challenges are coming from. The *Companion* shows us that the Eurocentrism of art history is eroding and that the history of interactions between cultures has brought new dimensions into the understanding of art in Australia. Yet there is still some way to go before we achieve a truly cross-cultural visual history. ■

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