

Obituary: Arthur Boyd (1920-1999)

"Concepts involve the future, possessions don't"

Richard Phillips
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The death of Arthur Boyd, aged 78, on April 24, marks the passing of one of Australia's most respected expressionist painters. A member of the generation of artists and intellectuals who came to maturity during the Depression and World War II, Boyd was one of the few internationally-known Australian artists from that era still alive and working in the 1990s.

Boyd's paintings, drawings, lithographs and ceramics transformed the harsh reality of urban and bush Australia into a mythical place, a country inhabited by an eclectic collection of characters and events drawn from ancient Greece, the Old Testament, and Australian history. While Boyd relied on the Australian landscape for visual inspiration, his work rose above its geographical origins to examine universal social and psychological themes—love and affection; jealousy, deceit and vanity; racism, poverty and war.

Born in 1920 in then rural Murrumbidgee, now a suburb of Melbourne, Arthur Boyd began painting as a boy. Provided with ample supplies of paints, brushes, canvas and constant family encouragement, he received his first art prize at the age of 11.

Boyd had little formal training, his artistic education nurtured by his close-knit devoutly Christian and slightly Bohemian family. Bible readings and passionate discussions on literature, art, and drama were regular nightly events at the Boyd's, a family whose artistic roots went back to the previous century. Arthur's father, Merric Boyd was an accomplished potter and sculptor, his mother Emma, a painter. His grandparents—Arthur and Emma—were landscape painters, as was his uncle Penleigh. David, Guy, Lucy and Mary, Arthur's brothers and sisters, were also artists.

In 1935 Arthur Boyd began working part-time at his uncle's paint factory in inner city Melbourne. Here he came into contact with the mass unemployment and poverty of the Depression, scenes that made a permanent impact on him. A year later he was sent to live with his grandfather who taught the teenager the finer points of landscape, portraiture and a basic grounding in impressionist painting techniques. Some of Boyd's early influences were the visionary poet and printer William Blake, Vincent van Gogh and Oskar Kokoschka.

Boyd's first paintings were mainly rural and coastal landscapes: audacious but fairly innocent works of natural beauty. As the talented young man began to mature and move outside his immediate family circle and into an increasingly troubled world,

his work began to assume a more intense character.

In 1938, a year after his first solo exhibition, Boyd became good friends with Josl Bergner, a young artist and recently arrived Jewish refugee from Poland. Bergner explained to the 18-year-old Boyd the implications of Nazi rule in Germany and the intensifying racist attacks on Jews. In 1941, Boyd held a joint exhibition with Bergner and Noel Counihan, a member of the Communist Party of Australia. The same year he was conscripted into the army and joined the Cartographic Company where he came into contact with other artists, John Perceval, Albert Tucker and Sydney Nolan.

Confronted with the brutal reality of war, Boyd painted a number of unsettling urban landscapes—*The gargoyles*, *The baths*, *Lovers on a bench*, *Butterfly man*, and *The season*. These are some of his most outstanding paintings.

Painted with wild, almost frenetic brush strokes, the images are of stick-like people, cripples and dogs driven mad by an unseen and unnatural force. Human activity is permeated with intense frustration and despair. Love-making, a fairly common subject for Boyd, has an hysterical quality and is invariably interrupted by intruders of one or another kind.

Boyd and most of these young, Melbourne-based artists were at odds with the stultifying Australian art scene—its preference for naturalistic, self-satisfied and banal bush landscapes or bland, soulless portraits. One critic described the art officialdom as “amorphous and slithery-seekers after the ‘poetry’ of the Bush”, or “contrivers of that romantic gloom that invariably surrounds the head of a wealthy merchant when he sits for his presentation portrait”.

An indication of the art establishment's pathological distrust of modernism was the infamous NSW Supreme Court case against the 1943 Archibald portrait prize. Seven artists, competitors in the contest, headed by two academic painters—Mary Edwards and Joseph Wolinski—issued a writ against the Archibald judges claiming the prize, which was awarded to William Dobell, had been wrongfully given to a caricature. The prize-winning painting, the Supreme Court was told, contained distortions. A “genuine” portraitist and the great masters “never distorted”. The court ruled in favour of the Archibald judges.

Those opposed to the established art scene began to coalesce into two main factions—the Social Realists and the Angry Penguins.

The Social Realist group was led by CPA member Noel Counihan and heavily influenced by the mind-deadening and sycophantic Soviet Stalinist school of Socialist Realism. The Angry Penguins, a loose alliance of radical liberals and anarchists, included Nolan, Tucker, Perceval and the Adelaide poet, Max Harris. Each tendency attempted to establish control over Melbourne's Contemporary Art Society, the main exhibition space for modern art in Australia.

Boyd stood on the periphery of the Angry Penguins group and avoided the heated and often-confused discussions and debates in the Contemporary Art Society. The most important of his paintings from this period— *The mockers*, *The mourners*, *The golden calf* and *Melbourne Burning*—drew on Biblical themes, subjects clearly at odds with the Social Realist school.

After the war, in the late 1940s and early 1950s, Boyd produced a number of striking, almost primitivist, landscapes. The dark days of the war are absent with man and beast, whether in tangled rain forests or in semi-desert country, merged into a relatively tranquil and timeless countryside.

In 1951 Boyd journeyed to central Australia where he witnessed the extreme poverty and racism facing Aboriginal people. Sketches and drawings from this visit germinated six years later in his *Love, Marriage, and Death of a Half-Caste* series (1957-59), a collection of mystical Chagall-like and vaguely erotic images of a half-caste Aborigine and his white bride. Trapped in a dank and claustrophobic netherworld, the protagonists, surrounded by ignorance and bigotry, are disoriented and dazed, terrified by the past, fearful of the future.

Some years later Boyd commented that the paintings could have been stronger and “more Goyaesque”. Despite some mawkish moments, the series represented the first attempt by a significant Australian artist to reveal the real plight of the Aboriginal people and was generally well received by Australian critics.

The first London showings of the *Half-caste* series were widely acclaimed and opened a new chapter in Boyd's career. Having moved to Britain in 1959, Boyd worked intensively over the next eleven years holding a number of successful exhibitions, including a retrospective at London's Whitechapel Gallery in 1962. A major factor in Boyd's prolific output at this time was his frequent visits to the great European art museums and galleries where he viewed for the first time the original works of the classical and modern masters.

Perhaps the most charged and challenging of Boyd's work is the *Nebuchadnezzar* series produced between 1968 and 1971 about the ancient Babylonian king who captured and later destroyed Jerusalem. This spectacular collection of 34 paintings is said to have been inspired by Boyd's witnessing of a self-immolation protest against the Vietnam war at Hampstead Heath, near his home. The series, which is permeated with intense anger, soars way above the immediate political issues posed by Vietnam to touch on many of the psychological themes with which Boyd wrestled throughout his career.

According to Christian mythology, King Nebuchadnezzar was punished by God and forced to suffer in the wilderness for seven years. Boyd's Nebuchadnezzar is a strange bewildered man, a fallen idol who transmutes into a toadlike animal and is forced to

wander in a nightmarish and infinite wasteland harrassed by lions and other creatures.

In *Nebuchadnezzar on fire falling over a waterfall*, the most powerful image of the series, the fallen monarch shoots like a flaming comet over the Australian bushland. Each of the paintings exudes a deeply-felt, almost painful emotional rage, not just against war but vanity, hatred, greed and all other human follies. The depth of Boyd's passion is expressed in the thick, almost sculptured layers of paint applied to the canvass.

Other significant works produced over the next two decades include the *Chained figure* series (1973), the *Narcissus* etchings and paintings (1976-1983), and his subversive *Australian Scapegoat Triptych* (1988) and a constant stream of bush landscapes.

In 1971 he returned to Australia to take up an artist-in-residence position at the Australian National University. Torn between his love of the bush and his constant desire to be close to the European artistic and cultural centres, Boyd travelled back to Britain, only to return to Australia in 1974. Regular visits back and forth between Australia and Britain became a constant pattern in the last 20 years of his life.

In 1973 Boyd and his wife bought a large farm at Riverdale near Shoalhaven, on the south coast of New South Wales. This was followed a few years later by the purchase of nearby Bundanoon. The Shoalhaven River, which passed through the property, became one of Boyd's favourite landscape subjects.

A shy and retiring man, Boyd was not spoiled by critical acclaim or financial success but continued, right up until his death, to make his work freely available to the broadest audience. In 1975 he gave 3,800 works, including over 2,500 drawings and 200 paintings, to the National Gallery of Australia. And in 1993, after battling years of government red tape, Boyd donated his Shoalhaven property of over 1,000 hectares to the national government for use as an artists' centre. This gift included hundreds more Boyd paintings and drawings, and several thousand works from five generations of the Boyd family.

As Boyd explained just a few years before his death, “I really don't want to hang on to possessions. What I want is to hang on to concepts. Concepts involve the future, possessions don't.”

Conscious of his failing health, Arthur Boyd returned to Australia early this year to see his extended family for the last time. He leaves behind a substantial body of work and one that will no doubt influence a new generation of artists. He is survived by two daughters and a son, and Yvonne, his wife of 54 years.



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