The Last of the Angry Penguins

An exhibition in memory of Australian painter John Perceval

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The Last of the Angry Penguins is the title of a small tribute exhibition of 23 paintings, pastels and drawings by John Perceval at the Wagner Gallery in Sydney. The show provided a rare chance to study and appreciate work by this significant Australian artist. Perceval, who died of a stroke last October at the age of 77, was the last surviving member of the Angry Penguins, a loose-knit group of Australian painters who radically changed the local art scene in the 1940s and early 1950s.

The Angry Penguins, who coalesced around Max Harris and John and Sunday Reed, took their name from an art and literary magazine first published by Harris in 1940. Members of the largely self-taught group included Arthur Boyd (1920-1999), Albert Tucker (1914-1999), Sidney Nolan (1917-92) and Joy Hester (1920-60). The group rejected conservative styles favoured by the Australian art academies and the socialist realism championed by the Stalinist communist parties and looked to early European expressionists and the Surrealists for inspiration. Much of their early work focused on social themes, in particular scenes of urban poverty. While members of the grouping went their separate ways during the late 1950s, they had a lasting influence on contemporary Australian art.

A shy and introspective man, John Perceval spoke little about his art or personal life. He was born at Bruce Rock in Western Australia on February 1, 1923, the second child of Bob and Dorothy South, who separated when he was only two years old. Up until the age of 12, the young boy and his older sister spent alternative periods with their mother in Perth, the state capital, or with the father on a large wheat farm 220 kilometres east of Perth.

The children had few friends and farm life was harsh and isolated—the nearest school, a primitive building alongside the railroad-tracks, was a five-kilometre walk away. The farm was poor and Bob South was forced to labour from daybreak till evening often returning to the homestead in a smoldering temper. Perceval was haunted by some of these early childhood memories and recorded them in later paintings.

In 1934 he moved to Melbourne with his mother where he later changed his name from Linwood South to John Perceval, adopting the surname of his stepfather, and attended a Melbourne boarding school. At school the teenager, who had already begun drawing and painting, had his first access to a reasonable library and was profoundly affected by reproductions of the great masters in the school's collection of art books. In fact, the first painting in the recent Sydney show is called *Sunflowers* (1935), a copy of the well-known Vincent van Gogh painting. Notwithstanding his youth, Perceval captured the vibrant life essence in the van Gogh, putting his own stamp on the image with unique textural qualities and depth.

In 1937, Perceval contracted the life-threatening poliomyelitis. He survived the infection, but it seriously affected his neck muscles, speech patterns and left him with a permanent limp. The impact of the disease gave him constant troubles throughout his life, making it difficult to swallow or conduct a normal conversation, problems that exacerbated Perceval's self-conscious outlook and shyness.

During recuperation he prodigiously copied illustrations and paintings by 16th and 17th masters and spent hours drawing and painting works by William Blake, Pieter Breugel, Hieronymus Bosch, William Hogarth, Tintoretto and others from books given to him by his parents. His painting became more prolific and he began to be noticed beyond his immediate circle of family and friends.

In 1941, following the outbreak of war in the Pacific, Perceval volunteered for military service. While he was rejected as unfit for military duty, he was assigned to the Army Survey Corps where he used his drawing skills as a draughtsman. As a member of the Survey Corps, Perceval came into contact with other young artists, including Arthur Boyd, Albert Tucker and Sidney Nolan. He became close friends with Boyd, and his well-known artistic family, and met Mary Boyd, Arthur's sister. The two fell in love and were married in 1944.

The first three publicly exhibited paintings by Perceval were shown at Melbourne's Contemporary Art Society in 1942. John Reed acclaimed the 19-year-old's audacious work in the *Angry Penguins* magazine and his work was included in the celebrated Anti-Fascist Exhibition in Melbourne and Sydney later that

year. This important exhibition helped to establish Perceval's reputation in the national art scene.

The Last of the Angry Penguins exhibition includes *Flinders Street at Night* (1943), a typical Perceval work from this period. The painting shows two people dancing on what appears to be the top facade of a rather indistinct building. The main focus of attention is the nightmarish qualities of a woman dancing with a death mask. Two trumpet players in the foreground also give it a macabre tone. The painting seems to be speaking out against the immense slaughter of human life and the distorted social relations produced by the war.

In the aftermath of the war, Perceval began producing religious and often mystical paintings. The Angry Penguins had no coherent political outlook and the Boyd family circle espoused a confused mixture of liberal humanism and religious pacifism. Perceval received financial support from John and Sunday Reed for several years. But when they told this rather impressionable young man that his paintings were too obscure, he decided to destroy many of works and then abandoned painting for the next eight years.

These were also difficult financial times for Perceval and his family. Although they lived in the Boyd family home, Perceval had little money and his attempts to generate income through pottery and ceramic sculpture were largely unsuccessful. The family lived in extreme poverty for several years, up until the mid-1950s. Perceval began drinking heavily, a habit that undermined his health and eventually destroyed his marriage.

Perceval resumed painting in 1956. It is not clear what inspired his decision to pick up the paintbrush again, but whatever it was, his harbour scenes from the Melbourne suburb of Williamstown and seascapes from this period are extraordinarily joyous and spontaneous works. Perceval had moved away from the confused religious themes of the early post-war period and rediscovered his artistic voice, this time with carefree, almost childlike landscapes.

Perceval's most creative period was from 1956 to 1967. His pallet had matured and his striking but subtle contrasts in tone and colour are vibrant. Rich dark colours capture the harbour rocks with delicately subtle shades of blue for the sea and sky combined with audacious and invigorating yellows to transmit the bright sunlight. These are vigorous and at times intoxicating paintings.

In 1961 he began to win wider recognition and was asked to contribute to the Whitechapel Gallery's *50 Australian Painters* show in London. His work was also included in the 1962 *Rebels and Precursors* in Australia, London's Tate Gallery in 1963 and later that year at the Museum of Modern Art in Brazil. In 1965 he was awarded a Creative Fellowship at the Australian National University in Canberra.

Writing in the early 1960s, art critic Robert Hughes commented on Perceval's “spontaneous” approach, describing his works of this period as “roly-poly art, full of gusto and bounce” often “done at breakneck speed: three to four hours, if that, suffice”. “Perceval relies on the expressive qualities of gesture more than any other local figurative painter. He is quite indifferent to iconographic form. It has no relevance to him, for there is no gap in his work between perception and act: only a lyrical, and essentially physical, immediacy of direct involvement.”

While Perceval's work at this time is celebratory and often exhilarating, he was wrestling with alcoholism and other serious personal problems. In fact, his drinking had become so serious that he had to be hospitalised in 1965 for treatment and soon after began to develop psychiatric problems. In 1977 he was diagnosed as suffering from schizophrenia and spent almost ten years, from 1977 until 1986, in a Melbourne psychiatric institution.

Perceval produced a handful of crayon sketches during this time but did not resume painting and drawing seriously again until 1987. Some the work produced after his release from hospital, however, is disoriented with an underlying tension and trauma. Drawings such as *Jack-in-the-box with rooster lid* (1987) and *Feeding the Seagulls* (1988), although not in the recent exhibition, include axe images and the faces are often ill-shaped and distraught.

Storm over Williamstown, *Rainbow over Williamstown* and *Seashore*, all produced in 1994, and included in the Wagner Gallery show, are a slight although inconsistent return to earlier form by Perceval. The sea and harbour in *Storm over Williamstown* are rendered in lush royal blue—all broadly flowing—and the sky is full of life with numerous seagulls in flight. But Perceval's white v-shape birds tend to overwhelm the painting, undermining the work's overall coherence.

Perceval, who continued working right up until his death, once explained: “At all times my work is primarily a response to the subject, to light and trees, air and people... to a desire to equate the vitality, the pulse of life and the world around us.”

Despite the decline in his later work, Perceval's better paintings are unaffected and deeply honest statements. They not only deserve to be studied but above all enjoyed for their passion and warm humanity.