Pioneering modernist exhibition: a cultural turning point for 1930s Australia

Degenerates and Perverts: The 1939 Herald Exhibition of French and British Contemporary Art, by Eileen Chanin and Steven Miller, Miegunyah Press

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Degenerates and Perverts, a richly illustrated 306-page book by Eileen Chanin and Steven Miller, examines the 1939 *Herald Exhibition of French and British Contemporary Art* and its impact on Australian artistic and social life. Accurate information about the impact of this landmark event in local cultural history is long overdue.

The remarkable exhibition of fifty-nine painters and nine sculptors, many of them major figures of late nineteenth century and twentieth century art, was initiated by Australian newspaper magnate Keith Murdoch (father of Rupert) and financed by his Melbourne-based *Herald* newspaper. As well as leading British painters Stanley Spencer, Victor Pasmore, Walter Sickert and Edward Wadsworth, it also included the work of post-impressionists Vincent van Gogh, Paul Gaugin, Georges Seurat and Paul Cézanne; early moderns Pablo Picasso, Henri Matisse, Georges Braque and Marc Chagall; and other contemporary pioneers such as Giorgio de Chirico, Fernand Léger, Amedeo Modigliani, Max Ernst and Salvador Dali, to name a few. All told, 217 paintings and a smaller number of sculptures were on display.

While art patrons in New York, Chicago, Paris, London and Berlin and other major American and European centres had ready access to the work of these celebrated artists, an exhibition of this artistic range and size had never been held in Australia before. Not unexpectedly it generated passionate debate.

Artists, writers, students and thousands of ordinary people flocked to showings, breaking attendance records. Over 70,000 people saw the exhibition in Adelaide, Melbourne and Sydney, an astonishing figure considering Australia's total population in 1939 was only 7 million.

By contrast, the exhibition provoked an angry backlash from leading representatives of the local art establishment who vehemently denounced the show and worked to undermine it. In fact, the book's title is a direct quote from J.S. MacDonald, then director of the National Gallery of Victoria (NGV), who declared that most of the exhibition was "putrid meat" and the "product of degenerates and perverts".

Murdoch, an NGV trustee and avid collector, was clearly at odds with these sentiments. And while his taste was pedestrian—*Degenerates and Perverts* notes that he generally preferred "understandable art"—he hoped the show would encourage local artists. As he declared in the exhibition catalogue: "The artist, in all his work, must always be exploring and striving, and in Australia we have many artists of fine taste and sincerity whose vision will be widened by this experience."

Exhibition curator Basil Burdett, the Melbourne *Herald*'s art critic and a former gallery owner, assembled the show during a whirlwind five-month visit to Europe in 1938. Burdett selected the work, negotiated with British and European museums and galleries and organised transport of the collection, which arrived in Australia just before the outbreak of World War II.

The exhibition premiered at the South Australian State Gallery in Adelaide in August 1939 and ran for almost a month, attracting more than 7,000 people, from a city of less than half a million. The South Australian gallery, however, was the only major state-funded art museum to host the exhibition.

Directors of the National Gallery of Victoria (NGV) and the Art Gallery of New South Wales (AGNSW) ruled that it could not be held in their facilities because organisers wanted to charge a one-shilling entry fee to help cover transportation and insurance costs.

Rejected by the NGV, the exhibition was held instead at Melbourne's Lower Town Hall with a weeklong show planned. But such was its popularity—30,000 in the first seven days—that it had to be extended for another week. Crowds were so large that on the first day 2,000 people were turned away, even though opening hours were until 10 p.m.

Over 48,000 attended in Melbourne, an unprecedented number and one that further raised the ire of MacDonald and others. "[M]odern art," MacDonald declared, was "a mob invasion" whose popularity was the product of "a complete disdain of training and discipline, and from a hatred of true form." One Melbourne writer called for calm, warning patrons "not to be unduly alarmed" by the paintings on show.

In Sydney the equally conservative AGNSW trustees refused to provide gallery space and so the upper floor of David Jones, a leading city department store, was used for the exhibition, which opened on November 20. It attracted over 6,000 people in the first seven days with a total of 15,000 attending during the following weeks.

While the Sydney attendances were not as high as those in Melbourne, the exhibition produced heated debate on a range of questions.

Interestingly when Murdoch saw Dali's *La memoire de la femme-enfant* (1932) in Melbourne he declared it "an obscenity of the first order" and directed that it not be displayed in Sydney. Letters to the local press protesting this decision, however, forced organisers to return the painting to the collection on November 28.

But the animated discussion dealt not just with the extraordinary work on display—the show, after all, included Van Gogh's *Portrait of Alex Reid* (1887), Cézanne's *Portrait of Madame Cézanne* (1888-90) and *Bibemus* (1900), Modigliani's *Nude* (1916) and Soutine's *Madelaine Castaing* (1929)—but was also directed against the stupidity and

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entrenched provincialism of those controlling local art institutions.

When the Sydney exhibition ended, the paintings were loaned to the AGNSW, which agreed to take them for five months. But instead of displaying them the gallery trustees put the paintings in storage. Hundreds of artists and gallery patrons anxious to study the works petitioned the trustees demanding that they be put on show. The trustees claimed, however, that there was not enough space.

In reality there was plenty of room. The lower courts of the gallery were only displaying classical reproductions or copies, some of them quite large, which could easily have been taken down for a few months. Even more scandalous, the trustees were using a large portion of the gallery to exhibit their own mediocre paintings—double the space required to show the modernist works.

Angry letters were shot off to the press, questions raised in the New South Wales parliament and the issue taken up with the relevant state minister. Such was the hostility towards the AGNSW trustees that when one of them turned up at a public meeting, he was shouted down by over 200 artists.

Notwithstanding the vehement opposition of state gallery administrators, the modernist exhibition, and the mass response to it, sealed the fate of figures like J.S. MacDonald. He was removed as NGV director in 1942 and in New South Wales the state parliament passed legislation establishing fixed terms and an upper age limit for AGNSW trustees.

Moreover, the outbreak of World War II meant that the collection, instead of being returned to its owners in Europe, remained in Australia for the duration of the war. Many of the works were eventually included in separate exhibitions at the NGV and AGNSW, in 1942 and 1943, and a smaller version of the show was held in Hobart and Launceston in Tasmania, and in Brisbane, Queensland during 1945.

Perhaps the most revealing example of the ignorance and aesthetic narrow-mindedness of those dominating the local art scene was their failure to purchase any of the exhibition's most important works.

Two-thirds of the paintings were for sale and with the war raging in Europe they were being offered at reasonable prices. For example, Picasso's *Danseuses* (1908) could have been purchased for £627, Matisse's *Paysage à Collioure* (1907) for £502, Chirico's *The Gladiators* (1927) for £105, Chagall's *Fleurs* (1927) for £94 and Max Ernst's *Le Paysage au Germe de Ble* (1934) for for £53. There was also the possibility of buying major works by Cézanne, Gaugin, Van Gogh, Seurat, Bonnard and others.

But the NGV, which had an annual income of about £23,000 in 1939, and the AGNSW, refused to take advantage of this never-to-be-repeated opportunity. Instead, they bought a handful of pictures, most of them overpriced and inferior works by now forgotten British painters. The British media haughtily, but not without justification, declared that the AGNSW trustees were "cashed-up philistine colonials [who had been] hoodwinked into buying mediocre European works at inflated prices".

To rub further salt into the wound, the AGNSW also purchased one painting falsely attributed to Gaugin when, in fact, it had been produced by French artist Charles Camoin. Henri Matisse and Georges Roualt wrote to the gallery warning it of the mistake, but they were ignored.

Degenerates and Perverts is a serious work that contains high-quality reproductions of the major paintings, and features a wealth of background information, newspapers articles, exhibition advertising and a comprehensive catalogue and history of all the paintings and sculptures together with their 1939 sale price.

Authors Chanin and Miller are obviously fascinated by the period but, paradoxically, the book tends to underestimate somewhat the long-term impact of the exhibition. They suggest in various places that because local artists kept abreast of important developments in the visual arts in Europe, a cultural sea change in Australia was inevitable, with or without the exhibition, and that a great deal of mythology has developed about its impact.

It is no doubt true that many artists and other progressive elements were constantly striving to overcome the mind-numbing national atmosphere in pre-war Australia. Those who could afford it lived in Europe for lengthy periods to study firsthand the old masters and embrace the newly emerging artistic movements. Artists and intellectuals who fled fascist regimes in Italy and Germany and settled in Australia also helped changed the intellectual atmosphere. The authors also point to the formation of the influential Contemporary Art Society in Melbourne in 1938 and the growing success and popularity of its exhibitions. (*Rebels And Precursors: The Revolutionary Years of Australian Art*, by Richard Haese and published in 1981, is an important work about these developments.)

But it would be wrong to underestimate Australia's cultural isolation in the 1920s and 30s. Notwithstanding the money available to the NGV, per capita spending on galleries and museums in Australia was amongst the lowest of the advanced capitalist countries. Such was the limited access to the classics of contemporary art that in 1933, students and artists petitioned the AGNSW demanding that it purchase a collection of modern art prints and place them on display.

At the same time, the federal government maintained high tariffs on all imported works of art, including those produced by expatriate Australians, and strict censorship applied. More than five thousand works—books, films and other items—were banned in Australia in the late 1930s, including literature by Hemingway, Joyce and Huxley.

And more than a whiff of anti-Semitism permeated the official atmosphere. When celebrated composer Arnold Schoenberg applied for a teaching position at the Australian Conservatorium of Music he was rejected on the grounds of being "Jewish with modernist ideas and tendencies".

As the book explains, modern art was regarded as morbid and "un-Australian" by figures such as J.S. MacDonald and Lionel Lindsay, a conservative artist and AGNSW trustee, who believed they were patriotically preserving Australia from the new and "debased" art.

As Bernard Hall, who preceeded J.S MacDonald as NGV director, declared in 1932: "Never before in its history has art plumbed the depths of degradation and inanity nor have its currents been so fouled with the dregs of perversionism, stirred up by ignorant and commercial parasites." "In its ultra modern movements ... art shows itself slatternly and mannerless, devoid of breeding and tradition."

Under such conditions, the most progressive artists were largely marginalised, at least from broad layers of the population, and although they fought to create a new climate, they were unable to loosen the stranglehold that the deeply conservative elements had over the state-funded art museums and academies.

The *Herald Exhibition of French and British Contemporary Art* in 1939 powerfully, and with some drama, challenged this state of affairs.

Suddenly thousands of ordinary people, not just a small layer of artists, were compelled to judge Australian painting, and those controlling the state-funded galleries, by world standards.

The exhibition made clear that, contrary to the claims of figures like MacDonald and Lindsay, art was not an endless repetition and refinement of old forms, but a process of constant pushing of boundaries; a never-ending challenge to make new aesthetic discoveries. It declared in no uncertain terms that there were no specially anointed techniques or subjects; that everything was valid.

While these ideas were not new to the most progressive artists, they came like a thunderbolt to many ordinary people, confronting them with the need to determine where they stood.

In the final analysis, it was the intersection of the new artistic trends with the willingness of significant layers of the population to break out of the old strictures that decisively changed the atmosphere. And this, in turn, generated a new confidence and audacity amongst the most far-

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sighted and talented local artists such as Sidney Nolan, Albert Tucker, Arthur Boyd, John Perceval and Yosl Bergner.

Degenerates and Perverts tends to downplay the potency of this complex and decisive social interaction. Notwithstanding this weakness, Eileen Chanin and Steven Miller have written an important book and one that should be studied by all those interested in the history of the visual arts in Australia.

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