

Time and silence for meaning

The Spirit within Australian Contemporary Art,
Melbourne, December 2009

Rosemary Crumlin

I hardly noticed her the first time. About my age, grey hair, kindly eyes and lines. She was still inside the exhibition when I went in an hour or so later. Just looking. Standing there in an envelope of silence.



She was back the next day. Sitting on the floor with her back against the wall – looking, still. I went over and she said ‘Hello, I was here yesterday’.

‘I know, I saw you. How is this for you?’

‘Wonderful. I’m looking at that boat in the middle of the floor. It can’t float, can it? There’s nothing between the ribs. I’m remembering my life. I’d like to climb in and lie down there. There are other boats, too, paintings like that one over there with the two men in the canoe. They aren’t looking at each other; one’s an old man. It is right next to landscape with the ark – probably Noah’s. I’m so glad you got the Boyd Crucifixions, especially the woman crucified in the Shoalhaven. That has always been an important painting for me since I first saw it in 1988.’

Shoufay Derz, *Linking Back (dreamboat)* 2003, Plywood, 320 x 130 x 130. Collection of the artist

Linking Back forms part of a series of works exploring notions of identity and place, the search for connections and a sense of direction. The dreamboat, incomplete and skeletal, is like a journey that never finishes. The intention of this work is to convey a feeling of mystery and wonder, to evoke contemplation, and to allude to a place beyond what appearances conceal.

Shoufay Derz, 2009



We sat together in silence for a while – she and I. Meeting the stranger in each other and in the art too. Taking time. And then I moved back outside to the desk.

This exhibition, *The Spirit within Australian Contemporary Art*, was part of the wonderful Parliament of World's Religions held in Melbourne in December 2009. Visitors came from all around the globe to the new Convention Centre with its fine wood panelling and carpets with that distinct 'new' odour. Thousands flocked here and a sense of excitement and expectation pervaded the week. Sometimes jostling people laughed and spoke as they rushed from one session to another or just stood and gawked at world religious leaders (usually male) in their long robes of blues, crimsons and golds with caps and hats to match, who moved more serenely past, knowing the path. Buddhist, Christian, Jain, Hindu,

Quaker, Jew, Humanist – it didn't seem to matter so much that week that the world was so troubled and that in other places battles were being fought often in the name of religion. It was more that the week became a meeting with those of common heart and conviction, a kind of retreat where energies could be renewed and dreams re-found.

Our exhibition was part of that. It had been born of a conviction that great art is of the spirit and can evoke what is deepest in the viewer, as it had in its creator. But great art does not reveal itself easily to the casual viewer. It takes time and silence, for its meaning is made in the space between the magic of the work and the life experience of the viewer. Thus, as the week went on, the exhibition space became as much a 'zone of silence' as were the Buddhist meditation spaces in the landings outside.

For those of us who worked together as curators for the exhibition, there was a further dimension. Slowly we came to recognise and welcome differences of belief as we sought and selected works, struggled with bureaucracy, worried about funding and security, and then opened the doors each day and waited. We tried not to intrude yet to keep the space welcoming.

This small reflection closes, as it should, with some images and words of the artists. The images are not the art, nor are the words. The art is much more, but together they can be like an invitation to meet the stranger within ourselves first so that we can recognise and welcome some of those who come our way.

Sister Rosemary Crumlin RSM OAM is a nun, school teacher, artist, educationist, women's leadership consultant and curator of major exhibitions of religious and spiritual art.



Kim Hoa Tram (Shen Jinhe), *Who am I (Wo shi shui)* 2008 Ink on paper, 67 x 137 cm
 Translation of inscription in Chinese by the artist: Painted in 2008 by Yihe (meaning 'one harmony'), followed by the artist's seal saying 'Yihe' in red. Yihe is the pen or art name used by the artist.
 Private Collection

In general we think this is me, this is my body. But once the question 'Who am I?' is raised, it means we begin to doubt the existence of ourselves and the things around us – are we real? Because our physical body will disappear one day, the so-called 'me' or 'self' will become nothing. So what is the real self? The 'real self' is 'no self'.

Kim Hoa Tram

Visual Arts Sub-committee:

Helen Summers (Chair),

Curators: Marian Baillieu, Isobel Crombie,

Rosemary Crumlin, Helen Light,

Nur Shkempi, and Ian Roberts



Euan Macleod, *Two in a Dinghy* 2007 Oil on canvas, 137 x 180 cm. Private Collection.

It could be anyone in the dinghy. I hope people see it as themselves. But it is also my story – my father at the back with the oars, me looking the other way. He was always keen on sailing. I never enjoyed it – it wasn't an area we could connect in. He died a while before I painted this, with Alzheimer's.

Euan Macleod, 2009

Gesher gratefully acknowledges that other works from *The Spirit within Australian Contemporary Art* are used in this 2011 magazine.