

INTRODUCTION

'Art makes the intangible, tangible'

– Victor Majzner

'Religious art is like the kiss of death for an artist. Dealers and galleries just don't want to know you,' the young artist said to me some years ago. And so it was, then. Australia and the art world were self-consciously secular. Unlike the USA, Australia was not founded on a religious dream. Nor was it on any search for a nirvana. The first settlers were Caucasian, often ill-educated, sometimes convicts who, along with their minders, were serving out their term in a hot, hostile and inhospitable climate. They thought the country empty, belonging to nobody, and acted as if this were so.

This exhibition is about a different Australia. Its artists are unafraid to speak aloud in these works about their deepest concerns and their personal search for meaning. Although many come from Christian cultures, they turn for inspiration to a variety of traditions and sacred writings, including those of Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, Judaism, as well as of Christianity.

Arthur Boyd, the elder of the artists represented here, was never afraid of public opinion. Over his lifetime he probed Australian myths and became himself a myth to others. His *Half-Caste* series (1950s) explored the state of outback Aborigines, particularly those who stood between cultures because they were different of skin and colour. Over and over he returned to the Bible and its stories as a starting point for understanding and revealing the Australian psyche. His *Nebuchadnezzar* series saw the king consumed by his greed for gold; his many images of the *Prodigal Son* showed the father (his own father in his old chair) as he reached out his hand in tenderness to the prodigal.

In one way Boyd, with his two *Crucifixions*, anchors this entire exhibition with its questions and expression of the spirit. They are relatively late works of the 1960s, when Boyd was to turn 50. Both *Crucifixions* stand in the Shoalhaven. They are hardly distinguishable from the river and the hill behind. A woman crucified, a man crucified, a landscape suffering.

Echoes of Boyd's insight can be seen across the exhibition. On the opposite wall is Euan Macleod's reflection on his relationship with his own father. ('But I hope others will see themselves there.') They are together in a little dinghy but distant from each other. Fathers and sons. Macleod does not turn to the sacred books but uses his life's journey as his source.

Between these walls lies the calm certainty of two Aboriginal traditional elders. Ginger Riley Munduwalawala and Eubena Nampitjin are secure about their place in life. Both know that they belong to a particular part of the country where their spirit ancestors still dwell; both know that their spirit will return there at death to be reborn once more. Both are convinced that all they have to do is paint their story and we, who came here more than 40,000 years after them, will know that theirs is the centre of creation.

Michael Riley was an urban Aborigine of a different generation. He died too young. Death, black history and suffering are never far away for him. The bird wing against the hot blue sky smells of death as Riley stretches out its wing to photograph it. Victor Majzner's dove of peace is not dead but trapped; he places it in Noah's Ark by the fertile edges of the Sea of Galilee. It rests on a wedding ring. His symbolism is also multi-layered but always subservient to the pictorial demands of his canvas. The work is political but calm and nonviolent.

Others have moved with both politics and contemplation. Their images too reward reflection for they speak with a quiet voice. Fatima Killeen's collograph with its graceful Arabic calligraphy says 'No to war'. Phillip George's white surfboard is ready for the waves but will never go on the water. Its focus is one of humble submission – 'Inshallah' (God willing). The same calm underpins James Powditch's *Cathedral*. He sticks on pages from the *Odyssey* as he builds a self-portrait in the same way as 13th century architects built theirs. The shapes soar and balance each other in their verticality. They are buttressed with pages from a child's storybook. Claudia Terstappen has a stranger's (she came here late) understanding of the terror of the Australian bushfire. In her photographer's hands it becomes metaphor and tool.

Marianne Baillieu and Louise Rippert acknowledge a debt to ancient Hindu philosophy. Both works, so physically beautiful, are born in the soul and never stray far from the attention and hand of their makers. Baillieu's *Prana Portrait* 111 captures the rhythm and energy outside and within. Rippert's *Dance* is an invitation to share in her wonder and contemplation in the face of all life. The serenity of Kim Hoa Tram's Zen Buddhist imagery and poetry reaches out to the viewer in similar ways. It too has a sense of both journey and arrival, and an awareness of the fragility or even the illusion behind the question in Buddhism 'who am I?'. The bird is asking the question of its reflection – or is it the other way round?

The youngest artist in the exhibition, Shoufay Derz, also asks this question. She builds a boat. The boat is not going anywhere that we know. It would sink in water. Derz doesn't mind for she is interested in journeys which are cloaked in mystery. She seeks to know what her life will bring.

This is an exhibition to savour. Spirit within.

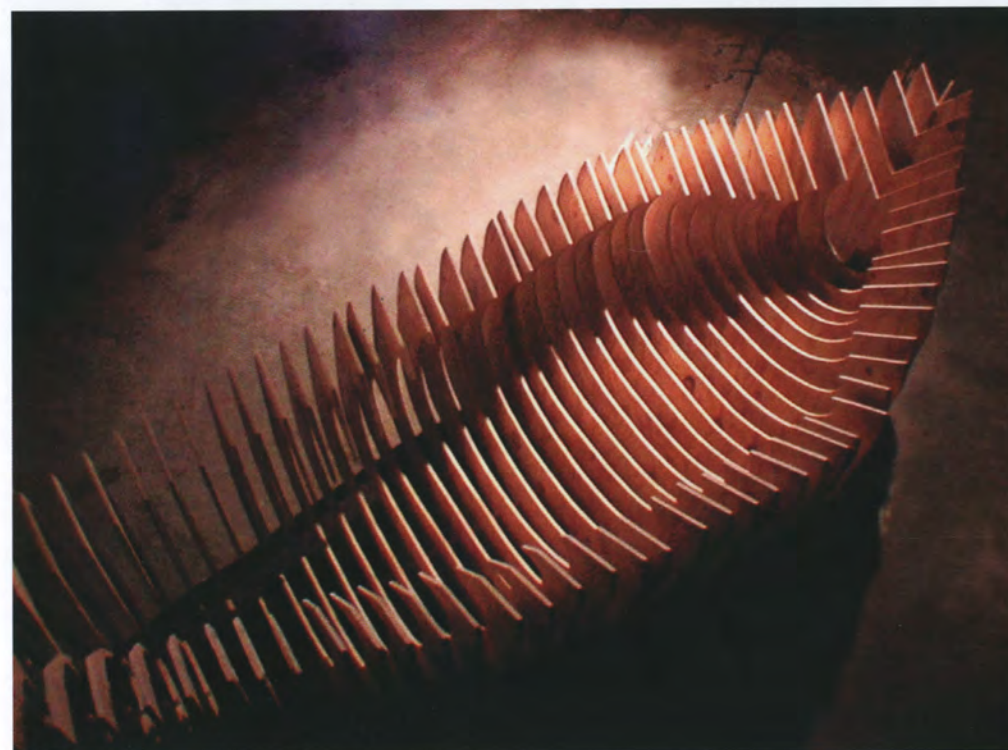
Rosemary Crumlin

MARIANNE BAILLIEU

Prana Portrait III 1998
Mixed media on plywood
240 x 120cm
Collection of the artist

'This work has the feeling of a human being – the form of a body held together by inner energy, not evil or bad but divine. Its title comes from the Sanskrit *pra ana* (breathing forth). The real gold sparkles with life's energy, an energy which is around you as well as within you. Such energy, I believe, continues after death as spirit.'

Marianne Baillieu



SHOUFAY DERZ

Linking Back (Dreamboat) 2003
Plywood
320 x 130 x 130 cm
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 dream boat, 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