

## ANNA GRAY

### Exhibiting Australia at the Royal Academy, 2013

#### Abstract

In this paper I propose to discuss the exhibition, *Australia*, which opened at the Royal Academy, London, on 21 September 2013 and ran until 8 December 2013. The exhibition was organised by the Royal Academy of Arts in partnership with the National Gallery of Australia. I intend to discuss the background to the exhibition, its content, and the ideas behind its display, as well as some of the public and critical response. I will also discuss some of the possibilities of the exhibition's impact.

I do so from an insider's - Curator's - point of view. For this reason, I will not review the catalogue to the exhibition, for which I was one of the authors. However, I will say that the catalogue was intended to provide an easy to read basic introduction to Australian art for a new audience who knew little to nothing about it. It was not the forum to provide new ideas about Australian art.

#### Introduction

There have been many previous exhibitions of Australian art in London, some of which have been extensively written about.<sup>1</sup> However, much of the assessment of these exhibitions has been based on newspaper reviews and exhibition files, rather than on analysis of the displays, a discussion of the works of art included and how they related to each other from a curatorial and aesthetic viewpoint, or an examination of the public response.

Many of these previous exhibitions have been acknowledged in the *Australia* catalogue: they are listed in the bibliography at the back of the catalogue, as well as referred to in many of the artists' biographies. They have also been mentioned in a superficial and inaccurate manner in articles about *Australia*. The exhibitions include those at the Grafton Galleries (1898), Burlington House (1923), Whitechapel Gallery (1961), Tate (1963), *Australian prints* at the Victoria & Albert Museum (1972), ICA and Serpentine Gallery, London (1982); Commonwealth Institute, London and Usher Gallery, Lincoln (1988); Institute of Contemporary Arts, London and the Museum of Modern Art, Oxford (1997) and the British Museum (2011).<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See in particular, Simon Pierse, *Australian Art and Artists in London, 1950–1965: An Antipodean Summer*, Farnham, 2012.

<sup>2</sup> *Exhibition of Australian Art in London, Grafton Galleries, London, 1898; An exhibition of Australian Art, Burlington House, London, 1923; Kenneth Clark, Robert Hughes and Bryan Robertson, Recent Australian Painting, exh. cat., Whitechapel Art Gallery, London, 1961; Australian Painting, Tate, London, 1963; Australian Prints, Victoria & Albert Museum, London 1972; Nancy Underhill et al., Eureka!: Artists from Australia, exh. cat., Institute of Contemporary*

Of the 145 artists included in *Australia*, well more than half (88) had never been included in any previous group exhibition in London. This reflects much of the research that has gone into Australian art since the 1970s, in publications, exhibitions and in collection building. Twelve artists from the 19<sup>th</sup> century, many of whom have had serious retrospectives, research undertaken into their work, and been purchased for public collections in recent years, had never been part of a group exhibition in London before. These are G.W. Evans, John Lewin, Robert Dale, E.C. Frome, John Skinner Prout, Oswald Brierly, Alexander Schramm, Ludwig Becker, Edmund Henderson, Nicholas Chevalier, Isaac Whitehead and H.J. Johnstone. And Eugene von Guérard's work was not included in a group exhibition until 1988, when a very minor work was included in *Stories of Australian art* at the Commonwealth Institute, and then by only a minor work, *Forest scene in the Ranges from Dandenong to Gippsland 1878?* For instance, just in the last few years there have been serious retrospectives on the work of John Lewin and Nicholas Chevalier and a second retrospective on von Guérard, and Robert Dale, Edmund Henderson and Alexander Schramm have been part of survey exhibition on Colonial Western Australia and Colonial South Australia.<sup>3</sup>

From the inter-war period there were nine new artists, including important women artists such as Ethel Carrick, Grace Cossington Smith, Jessie Traill, Clarice Beckett and Dorrit Black, and two non-Melbourne/Sydney artists, James W.R. Linton and Kenneth Macqueen. Again, this reflects retrospectives, publications and collection building that has occurred in recent times.<sup>4</sup> Inevitably, *Australia* also includes many more recent artists, including those who have been shown at the Venice Biennale, such as Rosalie Gascoigne (1982), Bill Henson (1996), Howard Arkley (1999), Callum Morton (2007), Shaun Gladwell (2009) and Simryn Gill (2013).

It was not until the 1980s that photography was included in an Australian survey exhibition in London: in *Eureka!* at the ICA and Serpentine in 1982 and *Stories of Australian art* at the Commonwealth Institute in 1988. And again it was not until the 1980s that Aboriginal art was included in a group exhibition in London, and then only in a minor way, in *Stories of Australian art* in 1988. (Although Aboriginal art was included in an overseas exhibition of Australian art, again in a minor way, in the Australian art exhibition which was sent to the United States and Canada under the

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Arts, London, 1982; Jonathan Watkins, *Stories of Australian Art*, exh. cat., Commonwealth Institute, London, and Usher Gallery, Lincoln, 1988; Stephen Coppel, *Out of Australia*, London, *Prints and Drawings from Sidney Nolan to Rover Thomas*, exh. cat., British Museum 2011.

<sup>3</sup> Richard Neville, *Mr JW Lewin, Painter & Naturalist*, Sydney: Newsouth Publishing, 2012; Simon Gregg, *Nicholas Chevalier: An Australian odyssey*, Gippsland Art Gallery, Sale, 2011; Ruth Pullin, *Eugene von Guérard: Nature Revealed*, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, 2011. Anne Gray, *Out of the West: Western Australian art 1830s to 1930s*, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, 2011 and Jane Hylton, *South Australia illustrated: colonial painting in the land of promise*, Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide, 2012.

<sup>4</sup> For instance, Angela Goddard, *Art, Love and Life: Ethel Carrick and E. Phillips Fox*, Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane, 2011; Deborah Hart, *Grace Cossington Smith, 1892-1984*, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, 2005; Roger Butler, ed., *Stars in the river: the prints of Jessie Traill* National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, 2013; Tracey Lock-Weir, *Dorrit Black: Unseen forces*, Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide, 2014; Samantha Littley, *Making it Modern: The Watercolours of Kenneth Macqueen*, Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane, 2007

auspices of the Carnegie Corporation in 1941). Significantly, it was not until 1993, that a large exhibition of Aboriginal art, *Aratjara: Art of the First Australians*, was shown at the Hayward, London, after having being displayed in Düsseldorf - although to no critical success in London.

Not only has the research into, and collection building of, Australian art over the last 50 years been significant, with the greater acknowledgement of Colonial art, women artists, photography and Aboriginal art, but so too has the development of Curatorship in Australia.<sup>5</sup> It is significant to note that the 1898 and the 1923 exhibitions were essentially un-curated exhibitions, sent from New South Wales, with the 1898 exhibition being organized by the Trustees of the Art Gallery of New South Wales and the 1923 exhibition by the New South Wales Society of Artists.

### **The exhibition**

The *Australia* exhibition consisted of over 200 works in a range of media, covering a period of over 200 years, from 1800 until today. With twelve rooms and high walls, the Royal Academy's exhibition space is one of the largest and grandest in London, if not the largest. It is approximately twice the size of the Temporary Exhibition Gallery at the National Gallery of Australia. And the Royal Academy exhibition space has high walls and ceilings, with ornate decoration.

No matter how large the exhibition space, it was a difficult task to try to summarise the whole scope of Australian art into one exhibition. As the *Time Out* reviewer, Nina Caplan, who gave the exhibition 3 stars, noted

Of course, the country doesn't fit into a single show. But ... you will see strange wonders on your travels. And that, at least is true to the spirit of the place.<sup>6</sup>

And Alistair Sooke of the *Daily Telegraph* said something similar:

How can a single exhibition encapsulate the art of an entire continent? Of course it can't, but this one ... makes a pretty good fist of it.<sup>7</sup>

It would indeed be equally difficult to summarise the history of British art, American or French art in such a space. Tate Britain, for instance, has recently attempted to do so in its much applauded re-vamped exhibition spaces. The display of British art at

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<sup>5</sup> For instance, Barbara Chapman, *The colonial eye: a topographical and artistic record of the life and landscape of Western Australia, 1798-1914*, Art Gallery of Western Australia, Perth, 1979; Hendrik Kolenberg, *Tasmanian vision: the art of nineteenth century Tasmania*, Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery, Hobart, 1988; Ron Radford and Jane Hylton, *Australian Colonial Art 1800-1900*, Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide, 1995; Janine Burke, *Australian Women Artists 1840-1940*, Greenhouse, Melbourne, 1980; Jane Hylton, *Australian Women artists*, Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide, 2000; Gael Newton, *Shades of Light*, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, 1988

<sup>6</sup> Nina Caplan, 'Australia', *Time Out*, 26 September 2013.

<sup>7</sup> Alistair Sooke, 'Australia at the Royal Academy', *Daily Telegraph*, London, 16 September 2013

Tate Britain is larger in scope - using 20 rooms – 3 or 4 times the size of the Royal Academy space. Admittedly, 5 of these are before 1800. However, much as in *Australia*, they have squeezed more recent art into three rooms, with 1970-80s in one room, 1990s in another and 2000-13 in another – with each artist represented by a single piece (as is the case with the Australia exhibition at the RA).

## Background

The exhibition was the culmination of a mutual interest of Kathleen Soriano and Ron Radford to mount such an exhibition in London. Soriano had visited Australia as a courier from the National Portrait Gallery, London, and had spent time in a secondment to the Art Gallery of New South Wales as part of a Clore Leadership Program. During this time she had come to appreciate the qualities of Australian art, and developed a desire to mount an exhibition in Britain. However, it was not until Soriano was appointed Director of Exhibitions at the Royal Academy that she was in a position to do so. Concurrently, Radford, first as Director of the Art Gallery of South Australia and then as Director of the National Gallery of Australia, had campaigned for an exhibition of Australian art in London and had been discussing the possibility of such an exhibition with Directors and Curators in London – including Soriano's predecessor Sir Norman Rosenthal. Indeed, just before Rosenthal retired, he mentioned to Radford that he thought it might be time for an Australian exhibition at the Academy.

The Royal Academy was able to mount such an exhibition as a result of the sponsorship of 1 million pounds from generous Australian patrons (now known as the Australia exhibition patrons), and the support of staff at the National Gallery of Australia.

The works were drawn from public collections from around Australia as well as from a few British public collections. They included many of the icons held by these institutions such as John Glover's *A View of the Artist's House and Garden* 1835 (Art Gallery of South Australia - also included in the Tate 1963 exhibition), Arthur Streeton's *Fire's On* 1891 (Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney), Sydney Long's *The Spirit of the plains* 1897 (Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane), Margaret Preston's *Flying over the Shoalhaven River* 1942 (National Gallery of Australia, Canberra), Ian Fairweather's *Monsoon* 1961–62 (State Art Collection, Art Gallery of Western Australia, Perth) and Emily Kame Kngwarreye's *Anwerlarr Anganenty (Big Yam Dreaming)*, 1995 (National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne). The Directors of the various state and regional Galleries had to think long and hard about agreeing to lend these works, as they are key works in their own galleries, which are almost never off the walls there – and which the public have come to love and expect to see whenever they visit. However, these loans were almost all agreed to – as they recognised the importance of this exhibition. The exceptions were a few colonial works on paper from public libraries and the fragile Field Island bark from the Museum of South Australia, which because of its fragility required some more in depth negotiation.

## Presentation

The exhibition *Australia*, conveyed a story in a way that few previous exhibitions of Australian art in London had done. (Almost all previous exhibitions, apart from those at the Commonwealth Institute and the British Museum, had been medleys, mere collections of disparate works). *Australia* showed Australian art as inextricably linked to the land, and considered the way Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians have connected to their land and the manner in which their vision has now shaped our understanding of Australia.

Beginning with Shaun Gladwell's video *Approach to Mundi Mundi* and followed by a room of contemporary Aboriginal art, the exhibition was displayed in broadly chronological order.

The Gladwell introduction to the exhibition provided the viewer with 'a ride through the landscape'. An ecstatic hands-free motorbike ride on a road through an inland desert plain the video is a present-day 'dreaming' into existence. The actual plain is near Broken Hill, 318 miles north east of Adelaide. 'Mundi Mundi' specifies the Aboriginal name of the plain. Since the Aboriginal word 'Mundi' is also Latin for 'of the world', the rider's outstretched arms (actually those of the artist himself), this was an apt work to commence this exhibition of Aboriginal and non-Indigenous Australian landscape art. The work also provides 'a way of viewing' – a journey through the landscape along a road, which emphasises the significance of such road journeys and such a way of seeing for many Australians. (To some extent, although we became one country the various states federated into one nation in January 1901, it was the work of our road builders who truly united us, providing threads that link us all around the country).

There was a sense of drama in the arrangement of the works in the exhibition, opening with the large Gladwell video, moving into the room of impressive Indigenous works, with Doreen Reid Nakamarra's *Untitled* 2007 on the floor and Emily Kam Kngwarray's *Big yam Dreaming* 1995 hung up high above an archway at the end of the room. There were long sightlines through arched doorways, McCubbin's large triptych, *The pioneer* and Cossington Smith's *Four Panels for a Screen: Loquat Tree, Gum and Wattle Trees, Waterfall, Picnic in a Gully* 1929. Then Boyd's dramatic *Paintings in the Studio* 1973–74 on the end wall, the Olsen's *Sydney Sun* 1965 above it – stretching out the rays of the glorious Australian sun towards the gold painted cornices of the Royal Academy. From this standpoint, just visible in the room before this, on the ground, was Dorothy Napangardi's *Sandhills of Mina Mina* 2000.

And although not all critics agreed, one critic suggested that the room with Boyd and others was:

the heart of the exhibition ... the abstracted lyrical landscapes of Fred Williams, Ian Fairweather's 'Monsoon', a vast Arthur Boyd on the end wall, and John Olsen's tentacular sun ceiling painting above.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Andrew Lambirth, *The Spectator*, 5 October 2013.

## Content: Themes and Threads

The exhibition showed the landscape as a source of enjoyment and relaxation – with a number of beach scenes such as Charles Conder's *A Holiday at Mentone* 1888 and Ethel Carrick's *Manly Beach – Summer Is Here* 1913. Conder delighted in the intense blue sea and sky, the brilliant white sand, and people promenading during a day trip to the sea, and relaxing in the fresh sea air at Mentone. In this he created a celebration of Australian light and lazy leisure. Carrick on the other hand depicted the energy of a Sydney summertime beach, with crowds clustering by the sea to bathe, parade and sit in the sun.

The exhibition also showed Australia as a place of inspiration. For instance, despite perishing on the Burke and Wills expedition, Ludwig Becker made detailed written as well as visual observations during this ill-fated trip across the interior of the continent, during which he was astonished by clear night skies glittering with stars and a flashing meteor. He wrote: 'suddenly the whole firmament and the country underneath it was lit up by a day-like light: a splendid meteor fell in the west'. His inspired response to the landscape was evident in his remarkable, small-scale, gemlike watercolour sketch, *Meteor Seen by Me on 11 October* 1860. Tom Roberts was inspired by the outer Melbourne landscape during the 1880s, when he painted works such as *'Evening, when the quiet east flushes faintly at the sun's last look'*. Fellow Australian Impressionist, Arthur Streeton later nostalgically recalled: 'Roberts pointed to the evening sky in the East, and showed us the beauty of its subtle greys, and the delicate flush of afterglow, when the shadow of the earth upon its atmosphere, resembling a curved band of cool grey, rises up, and succeeds the rosy warmth as the sun descends further below the western horizon' (*Argus*, 21 June 1932).

But the exhibition did not shy away from conveying Australia as a place loaded with danger, with early works like Eugene von Guérard's *Bush Fire* 1859 and W.C. Piguenit's iconic *The flood in the Darling* 1890 1895. Both works recall Dorothy McKeller's well-known lines describing her much loved sunburnt country, a land of *droughts and flooding rains ... and fire and famine*". The von Guérard shows an advancing wall of fire devastating the pastoral plains between Mount Elephant and Timboon in the Western District of Victoria, in 1857. It was the first oil painting of a bush fire in European Australian art, and painted from a sketch made on the spot, it captures the horror of the artist's direct experience. The exhibition also included works by Indigenous artists on these themes: Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri's powerful image of bushfire, *Warlugulong (or Bushfire dreaming)* 1977 and Rover Thomas's iconic image, *Cyclone Tracy* 1991.

The exhibition also included landscapes showing the strangeness, and weirdness of Australia, that our historian, Manning Clark once remarked upon:

I believe quite passionately that Australia is a 'weird' country and that its weirdness has never been portrayed except in landscape painting.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Manning Clark, 1938, quoted in Mark McKenna *An Eye for Eternity: The Life of Manning Clark*, Miegunyah Press, Melbourne 2011.

Many artists also have captured this weirdness. Albert Tucker did so in *Sunbathers* 1945, in which the artist replaced the customary ideas of recreation and play associated with the Australian beach with hunks of blistering flesh thrown down on lurid sand backed by a blackened sky. The exhibition included Eric Thake's *Brownout* 1942, conveying the ominous atmosphere of the night streets in Melbourne during the partial blackouts in the Second World War.

Likewise the exhibition captured something of the Australian sense of humour. It did so in works like Conder's witty, eccentric *How We Lost Poor Flossie* 1889, in which Flossie, a fluffy white terrier visiting town with her owner, the artist, Frederick McCubbin, is depicted in a nose-to-nose greeting with a larger dark dog. (Only moments after this Flossie disappeared, never to be seen again). Humour was also present in works such as Nolan's *The Burning tree* 1947, about which Nolan commented ironically that he thought it was typically Australian for the policemen set fire to a whole hollow tree in order to keep warm, despite the fact that it would have been a blazing beacon to any of the Kellys or their friends.

### Threads and interconnections

There were also interchanges between the works in the exhibition. For instance there was a link between the way Colonial artist Thomas Watling depicted Sydney town from the distance with a panoramic viewpoint, in contrast to Tom Roberts's closer view from above a busy street in booming Melbourne in *Allegro con brio: Bourke Street west*, with people moving about, cabs jostling each other, and flags waving. And this lead to McCubbin's impressionist view of another Melbourne street, with its flickering light, and the almost dissolving, abstract forms of the activity of the city.

John Glover's early Tasmanian image, *A corroboree of natives in Mills Plains* 1832 provided both a link to and a contrast with the vision of a corroboree by the Aboriginal artist, Tommy McRae, *Victorian Blacks — Melbourne tribe holding corroboree after seeing ships for the first time* drawn some sixty years later, but displayed in the same room at the Royal Academy. Glover was intrigued by the Aborigines and their culture, having witnessed the Big River and Oyster Bay tribes dancing on the outskirts of Hobart, en route to the confinement of Flinders Island. But he painted this picture on his own property at Mills Palins in March 1832 from memory after the Aborigines had been driven from the district. In his haunting evening corroboree the farmer John Glover was perhaps feeling nostalgia for the removal of the Aborigines, or even some guilt for his and his fellow settlers' role as land-takers. The corroboree was one of McRae's favourite subjects and in this drawing (a page from a sketchbook) he depicts the bodies of the Aborigines in more detail than did Glover, decorated with body paint, with leaves tied below their knees and flag-like headdresses.

The exhibition drew attention to the fernmania of the mid-1800s, with the motif of Australian tree-ferns visible in works in a variety of media. A painting by Eugene von Guérard of a fern-tree gully and lyrebirds and another by Isaac Whitehead nearby a silver presentation candelabrum with ferns by Julius Schomburgk, and *Fairy scene at the landslip, Blacks' Spur, Victoria* by the artist photographer Nicholas Caire. These

images of fern-tree gullies lead to other works featuring Australian tall trees, such as Frederick McCubbin's impressionistic *Violet and gold* of 1911 and Roy de Maistre's *Forest landscape* c 1918. De Maistre's subject was similar to McCubbin's but painted in a quite different manner. He used the Australian gum tree to create a bold composition of verticals and diagonals; the play of warm advancing and cool receding colours, somewhat in the manner of Cézanne. And from these gum tree forests, the exhibition moved on to show the Tasmanian wilderness of Peter Dombrovskis and David Stephenson (with the Dombrovskis' image becoming well known through its use in a protest poster in 1983, against the proposed hydroelectric dam (the Gordon below Franklin Dam project)). And then the exhibition continued the theme of forests with the Queensland rain forests depicted by William Robinson and Peter Booth. With Robinson's subtropical rainforest showing a land of heavenly bliss, with archaic vegetation surging and swirling in multi-directional perspectives.

The theme of the panorama – the long view of a large land – was repeated within the exhibition. The Dale panorama of 1834 showed early settlement from a colonists perspective, produced to entice prospective immigrants to Australia. Whereas Bea Maddock's more recent 1980s panorama, *TERRA SPIRITUS* presents a profile of the entire coast of Tasmania viewed from the sea, as if seen from a circumnavigating vessel. The simplified outlines of the land hark back to topographical drawings made to aid navigation. While the hand-drawn Aboriginal words that float over the sea confidently name important Indigenous places, the English words printed in blind letterpress text, diffidently transcribe place names assigned by the explorers.

The image of the backview of a man on a horse (or motorcycle) ran throughout the exhibition. It began with E.C. Frome's 1840s image of a lone explorer in a frighteningly barren landscape below the Flinders Ranges. And then was seen in Tom Roberts's 1890s image, *A Break Away*, with the heroic stockman straining to rein in his flock, an image of a distinctively Australian figure: strong, athletic, skilful and courageous. That figure somewhat morphed into Ned Kelly in Nolan's iconic 1940s image of Kelly the defiant, with Kelly placed on top of the horse in a way that creates a sense of perfect authority. There was also a sense in which this lone figure moving into the distance was echoed in Shaun Gladwell's more recent, *Approach to Mundi Mundi...* As art critic for the *Daily Telegraph*, Alistair Sooke observed,

Nolan and Gladwell both distil the principal theme of the RAs exhibition: man's heroic relationship with the thrilling but unforgiving Australian landscape.<sup>10</sup>

The man on the motorcycle in Shaun Gladwell's work had been mirrored in a man on a motorcycle with outstretched hands in Clarice Beckett's 1930s oil, *Morning Shadows*, in which, using rich shadowy tones of dark and soft grey enlivened by touches of luminous colour, the artist suggested the freedom a lone motorcyclist travelling the wide open road in Suburban Melbourne. And there were also variations on this theme in Axel Poignant's 1950's *Swagman, on the road to Wilcannia* and somewhat humorously in Jeff Carter's *Tobacco Road*.

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<sup>10</sup> Sooke, *ibid*.



There were other connections too – that of Max Dupain's iconic 1930's image of the sunbaker with drops of water glistening on his bronzed shoulders. contrasted with Tucker's bleaker, surreal 1940s image of sunbathers with blistered skin. Or the contrast between von Guérard's colonial image of Mount Kosciusko and that of Fred Williams. Von Guérard captured the mountain's sublime, awe-inspiring aspect, with one of the small foreground explorer figures shown with outstretched arms, as if to exclaim 'behold God's creation'. Williams, on the other hand, captured the feeling of grasses bleached by extreme weather conditions, animated by small touches of red blooms, and showed the cloud turning to fog creeping over the edges.

Heysen's depiction of the Australian 'outback' in his 1930s Flinders Ranges watercolour, *The Land of the Oratunga* was mirrored in Imants Tillers's *Shadow of the Hereafter* of 2007 in which words float over the land, ghost-white stencilled letterings of the names of white settlers' ghost towns or of Aboriginal tribes who no longer haunt these inland ranges. The dark semi-circles, fragments of lettering can be read as a muttering of lost meanings, and misunderstandings.

The theme of camps was repeated throughout the exhibition, with the 1820s by Augustus Earle of *A native camp* in New South Wales and the 1850s image by Alexander Schramm of *Adelaide, a tribe of natives on the banks of the river Torrens*, sympathetic portrayals of the plight of the Aboriginal people. Towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century when artists ventured to camp in the bush they depicted themselves in works such as Tom Roberts's *The artists' camp*. Nolan depicted policemen camping in the bush, setting fire to an old hollow tree to keep warm, but at the same time providing a blazing beacon to any of the Kellys or their friends. And more recently Hossein Valamanesh has depicted making a campfire in the bush in *Longing/Belonging* 1997. In doing so, in making a campfire on a rug made by Qashqa'i pastoralists of Southern Iran, in arid mallee-gum scrubland by the big Murray River in Australia, Valamanesh confirmed his commitment to the process of settling in a new country. Whereas, Indigenous artist Christian Thompson, in *Dead as a door nail* 2008, paid homage to earlier artists such as Frederick McCubbin and his painting *Down on his luck*, while at the same time asserting his Indigenous heritage.

There was also the theme of the woman in the landscape, from the early 1880s image of a young girl lost in the bush in McCubbin's *Lost*, to the more leisurely view of women feeling comfortable in their place in the landscape in Roberts's *Slumbering sea, Mentone*. Then there was the woman in landscape in Sydney Long's *The Spirit of the Plains* in which the woman becomes the haunting spirit of the land, a nature sprite, leading a group of elegantly dancing birds before a stand of swaying eucalypts, in harmony with nature. She is a natural outgrowth of the bush, an extension of its soul.<sup>11</sup> And then there was George Lambert's 1920s view of a woman in the landscape *The squatter's daughter*. She is a modern woman, typical of the landowners of the 1920s who did not need to work their properties themselves, but were able to employ others to do so. And then there was Russell Drysdale's iconic 1940s view in *The Drover's wife*. She may wear a drab, unfashionable dress, but she stands assuredly, looking out towards the viewer with her feet firmly planted on the

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<sup>11</sup> Robert Hughes, *The Art of Australia*, Ringwood, Victoria, 1966, p. 77.

ground. She is laconically at home in her environment – as resilient as the environment demands.

## Responses

The public have responded very well to the exhibition. It has been well attended, and recent reports indicate that the public have been 'pouring into the exhibition'. Indeed, the general public have been genuinely enthusiastic about the exhibition. One visitor remarked:

"Australia" is remarkable for being very absorbing, throughout ALL its changing themes and historical periods ... [One} thing I learnt from the exhibition as a whole is how varied (by region as well as by artist) is the Aboriginal work.<sup>12</sup>

All the public lectures were packed. An indication of the genuine and serious interest in the exhibition, after a talk about the Colonial works in the exhibition given by Ron Radford, the questions were serious and of a high quality like: 'how did the artists get paper and paint?', 'some of the captions said the works were only acquired in the 1970s – does that suggest that Colonial art has only been purchased relatively recently?'. This indicated a serious engagement by at least some of the British public with the exhibition.

Considerable serious interest in the exhibition was reflected in the fact that the Symposium held by the Menzies Centre in conjunction with the exhibition was fully booked – and people had to be turned away. Those who attended, likewise, indicated an enthusiastic support for the exhibition. Andrew Wilton, the former Keeper of the British Collection at Tate described the exhibition as: 'a rich, fascinating and informative exhibition at the RA which I look forward to visiting several times. I hope it gets the public credit it deserves'.<sup>13</sup> He expressed quite forcibly his anger at the few negative critics.

What also was important was that this exhibition provided the opportunity for Australian artists to talk to the British public. Imants Tillers, Shaun Gladwell and Christian Thompson were all invited by the Royal Academy to present public lectures and G.W. Bot and Kathy Temin gave papers at the *Australia: land and landscape* Symposium at Australia House. And it may come as a surprise, but for a senior artist such as Imants Tillers, who has been well represented internationally, this was the **first** time that he had been invited to present a talk internationally. Tillers was also invited by the RA to talk to a select circle of critics. The exhibition also opened doors for Tillers, giving him the opportunity to meet with the President of the Royal Academy, Christopher le Brun (with whom he had exhibited in the US in the 1980s) as well as with Iwona Blazwick, Director of the Whitechapel Gallery.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Email from Jane Low to Anna Gray, 7 November 2013, NGA file

<sup>13</sup> Andrew Wilton to Anna Gray, 1 October 2013, NGA file

<sup>14</sup> Conversation between Imants Tillers and Anna Gray, 2 December 2013.

Although the few negative responses have been much publicised in the Australian press, there were many positive critical responses. Francis Davies, for instance, suggested that

Even if you only have a passing interest in Australian art, take a look at Australia. Be prepared to set aside a good chunk of time to soak it all in ... due to its scope, unless you're only looking for the utterly outlandish, there's something for everyone, it's all there – *Australia* is impressive, to say the least.<sup>15</sup>

Rachel Campbell Johnston in *The Times*, remarked that

This is not just a long overdue show but a powerfully atmospheric evocation of a country seen from myriad facets ... [T]o a **new** [and I emphasise the 'new'] British audience it can hardly feel anything but wonderfully fresh.<sup>16</sup>

This view was echoed by Andrew Lambirth in *The Observer*, in which he commented:

Inevitably the RA's long overdue and most welcome survey is a substantial display, covering as it does two centuries of artistic achievement throughout the continent, with more than 200 works by 146 artists. Impossible to absorb all that (in any meaningful way) during a single visit, so it's advisable either to return several times, or be selective. People will have their preferences ... But it has to be said that there are superb things to be seen in all sections of the exhibition, and, although the focus is firmly upon the influence of the landscape, the variety of work on view is exceptionally rich and exciting.<sup>17</sup>

Although it has been suggested that 'Australian art has been fairly consistently marketed in London since the end of the Second World War',<sup>18</sup> this is not entirely true. As outlined above, over half the artists in the exhibition had not been included in previous exhibitions. Moreover, although some Australian art may have been shown in London, but their works have only been seen by a select few. One only had to talk with the British public to know that most people in the northern hemisphere know very little about Australia art, or about Australia and its landscape. Furthermore, many of the critics, including a number already quoted, referred to the exhibition as providing 'the new'. One, specifically acknowledged that 'it's good sometimes to look at new art with a fresh eye'. Indeed, to some extent the negative criticism to the exhibition can be regarded as the shock of the new, and the failure to comprehend the new.

In considering the relatively few negative responses to the exhibition, and in particular the unfortunate comment about John Olsen's work, we have to remember that the British did not accept that Australians could be sufficiently

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<sup>15</sup> Francis Davies, 'Australia at the Royal Academy of Arts. Exhibition review', *The Upcoming*, 19 September 2013.

<sup>16</sup> Rachel Campbell Johnson, *The Times*, 16 September 2013.

<sup>17</sup> Andrew Lambirth, *The Spectator*, 5 October 2013.

<sup>18</sup> Anonymous review of my paper.

cultured to make wine, until our wine was submitted to blind testing. Until that point it was called 'Chateau chunder from down under'.<sup>19</sup>

Some of the British critics, however, at least in part, attempted to understand the exhibition, and Australia and its art. Rachel Cooke in *The Observer*, for instance, appreciated the way in which Shaun Gladwell expresses a sense of triumphant ownership of 'this vast and inhospitable land' in his video. And she also noted how some of the 19th and early 20<sup>th</sup> century paintings transmit 'a vivid sense of wonder in a new land: its strangeness, its ruthlessness, its confounding beauty'. And after some criticism, concluded positively, 'go, and feast your eyes on what is mostly a whole new world'.<sup>20</sup>

Some of the British critics have, however, at least in part, attempted to understand the exhibition, and Australia and its art. Rachel Cooke in *The Observer*, for instance, appreciated the way in which Shaun Gladwell expresses a sense of triumphant ownership of 'this vast and inhospitable land' in his video. And she also noted how some of the 19th and early 20<sup>th</sup> century paintings transmit 'a vivid sense of wonder in a new land: its strangeness, its ruthlessness, its confounding beauty'. And after some criticism, concluded positively, 'go, and feast your eyes on what is mostly a whole new world'.<sup>21</sup>

## Ambitions

It is too early to know overall impact of the exhibition. But at least it is possible to say that many people in Britain now have a better knowledge of Australian art, and its art – and some doors have been opened. Hopefully, the British now know that Australia is more than a sporting nation, or the world of *Neighbours* and such soap operas. Whether they are able to fully accept that Australia as a cultural nation, with a strong tradition of visual art, depends largely on how open to 'the new' they are.

Certainly, Ian Howard, an Australian contemporary artist (who was not included in the exhibition), but who viewed it with an open mind, remarked:

On the Saturday afternoon we saw the show it was 'chock a block' with very attentive people. Certainly some expats but mostly seriously interested folk from the U.K. and Europe. I don't think I have ever seen such an attentive 'label reading' audience, indicating serious contemplative engagement.<sup>22</sup>

Whether Directors and Curators from other places in the world will come and view this exhibition and ask for further exhibitions of a similar kind; or will be inspired to ask for exhibitions of more focussed aspects of Australian art – an exhibition of Australian Impressionism, or surveys of Charles Conder or Fred Williams, for example – only time will tell. Certainly, Andrew Lambirth of *The Spectator* would like to see more, writing:

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<sup>19</sup> *Chateau Chunder – a wine revolution*, ABC documentary.

<sup>20</sup> Rachel Cooke, *The Observer*, 22 September 2013

<sup>21</sup> Rachel Cooke, *The Observer*, 22 September 2013.

<sup>22</sup> Email from Ian Howard to Anna Gray, 13 January 2014, NGA file.

Charles Conder is one of the most remarkable artists here, with marvellous examples of his work on the wall and in flat cabinets ... We should see more of him ....

If this new survey helps to pave the way for solo museum shows of individuals such as Conder, Boyd, Smart and Williams, then it will have more than served its purpose; as well as bringing us much instruction and entertainment into the bargain.<sup>23</sup>

Shaun Gladwell already has his work in the *Motopoetique* exhibition in France at the Musée d'art contemporain de Lyon, and featured on the billboard outside the gallery and on the cover of the catalogue.<sup>24</sup>

What is more, the exhibition has had an impact on the artists themselves. It provided them with opportunities to compare their work with earlier artists. Gladwell, for instance, now sees his work as part of an ongoing tradition. As he remarked:

I felt something whilst looking at the show today that was different to patriotism or nationalism. I was moved by a realisation [that] this show ... is the result of generations of human beings (sprits) expressing themselves through the land ... and it was deeply moving.<sup>25</sup>

And Philip Wolfhagen observed that:

one is afforded a new perspective, permitting a rare objective view of where one's work is situated. This has been one of the benefits for me; to be better able to understand how my work contributes to a 'national' perception of landscape.

Given the response so far, it can be assumed that the exhibition will to some extent be an agent of change. Given the enthusiasm of many of the public, the exhibition will certainly produce a wider audience for Australian art in general. Many have seen the exhibition as an extraordinary breath of fresh air, providing a large body of work that people in Britain have never seen before.

As Imants Tillers commented:

Whatever one's standpoint this exhibition serves the interests of the entire Australian art world by putting Australian art back in the consciousness of the British and (international) public.<sup>26</sup>

Perhaps that in itself is achievement enough.

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<sup>23</sup> Andrew Lambirth, *The Spectator*, 5 October 2013.

<sup>24</sup> *Motopoetique*, at the Musée d'art contemporain de Lyon, 21 February – 20 April 2014.

<sup>25</sup> Email from Shaun Gladwell to Kathleen Soriano, 6 September 2013, forwarded to Anna Gray 23 November 2013, NGA file.

<sup>26</sup> Email from Jennifer Slatyer to Anna Gray, 6 December 2013, NGA file.

### **Biographical statement**

*Dr Anna Gray is the Head of Australian Art at the National Gallery of Australia. She was formerly the Director of the Lawrence Wilson Art Gallery at the University of Western Australia, Head of Art at the Australian War Memorial, Education Officer at the Art Gallery of Western Australia and Arts Officer with the East Staffordshire District Council. She has curated around 40 exhibitions, including ones on Arthur Streeton, Frederick McCubbin, George Lambert, Sydney Long, Russell Drysdale and Fred Williams. She has written widely on Australian art, including editing Australian Art in the National Gallery of Australia.*