

THE MODERN AND THE WEST

Brian McKay is a Western Australian Modernist. That is a label commonly given to McKay and is intended to situate his work both geographically and historically. It is a way of attributing to his work a self-evident status. Yet, as a coinage, Western Australian – and one could ‘place’ here *Australian* – and The Modern are in fact contradictory notions. Western Australia is a subset of Australia and Australia is itself a subset of Europe or, to be more accurate, a subset of Britain; while The Modern is transcultural and may be seen as antagonistic to the notion of heritage that is essential to the building of a nationalism.

It’s true that the history of Australian art is full of contradictions, from the Heidelberg School’s Australian Impressionism to the contemporary abstract painter John Nixon’s on-going insistent Modernism, to say nothing of the extraordinary phenomenon of Aboriginal painting and its initial misrecognition as a kind of post-Abstract Expressionist painting. This is so much the case that in Australian art a contradictory notion can easily become a description.

Were one to be asked to describe Brian McKay’s work, it is quite possible that one could answer: *It’s Western Australian Modernism*. Any non-Australian art historian would immediately doubt this as a description, seeing an Australian modernism as immediately a derivation of International – that is Euro-American – Modernism. But that would be to regard something as strange as an Australian modernism as if it would be a derivation of the International movement. It may be proposed, instead, that the work of Brian McKay is not suggestive of derivation as much as of devolution. It could be that over the course of his long career as an artist, in freely moving from one ‘modernist-inspired’ style to another, from one technique – painting to print-making to metal-work – to another, McKay is not presenting us with art as an investigation into the philosophy, technologies and experience of modernity’s transformation of the visual and that, rather,

he is rather using his skills as an artist to make 'marks' of an historical nature.

The concern of McKay's work is not the process of modern visual experience, which would be the concern of a Modernist, because the conjunction of subject and style slipped away early on in his career, each becoming as much a cipher as the other. Early on his work, both the style – *the means of representation* – and the subject – *the content of the representation* – of the work were equally abstracted from the impulse towards realism which, despite the layperson's sense of modernism as a trend towards the abstract – is a primary impulse of modernity. One would think that McKay's accepting of the emptying of style and subject would lead to a faith in abstraction, a belief of the sort that joins an early modernist painter like Paul Klee with a high-modernist like Mark Rothko. Intriguingly that was never the case, probably because he is of that generation of Australian intellectuals for whom an atheism was an essential part of their sense of the contemporary.

Despite McKay's work often being regarded as abstraction, it is seldom plainly so. Much, if not most of his painting, contains pictorial or symbolic elements. Even when his work is stripped back to the merest design and the barest material form often a title or the situating of the work – this latter point is most true of his architectural projects – refuses the work's abstraction.

In studying the content of his paintings it is interesting to note the prominence given to lettering and to walls. It is through reference to language and to architecture that McKay overcame the predominance of the spiritual that is everywhere in Modernist abstraction and thereby structured the viewing of his work as something closer to the looking that one undertakes when examining an artifact – a page, a ruin – than to the event of the energize glance and gaze of modern vision that has its origins in the 20th Century city with all its industry, temptation and visual pollution. Perhaps paradoxically, it is in the maritime calm and the attention to a certain type of peripheral archeology, constituted of scripts that can't be decoded and flat surfaces marked by a non-calligraphic scratching or an ersatz weathering, that the Western Australian aspect of

McKay's work is most visible.

Partly a consequence of his escaping Australia during the 1960s to go live on an Greek island, and partly a culturally embedded critique of the faux Mediterranean culture of Australia's West Coast, McKay's use of images and signs connoting the vernacular architecture of Greece is a touchstone for what concerns him even in those works that seem least connected to the actuality of his own experience. Through the 'false' artifacts of what seems to be Greek stone, script or wall, McKay evokes the myth of the Western Australian *place*.

Sometimes it's remarked that the clarity of the light on the Western Australian coast is close to that of the Aegean, in that it is both harsh and brilliant, burning away shadows to leave things-in-themselves luminous with Presence. The notion of a Mediterranean lifestyle sits just as well with inhabitants of The West as does the idea that the climate is Mediterranean. The implication of McKay's evocation of the Mediterranean carries with it a very stern, if often over-looked, rebuke to the New World culture of relaxation and plenty. By presenting the beauty of the Greek details – the steps of Fremantle's historic Roundhouse looking like those of a town on a Greek island, the graffiti on a wall – he also presents their notional defiance of displacement: a building's irrefutable locality, a foreign script's incomprehensibility.

The outcome of this for those viewers of his work who choose to think through the logic of the parallel between his resistance to landscape painting, which is of course the dominant mode in Australia, and his emphasis on style and subject as cipher may be the recognition that McKay is endlessly affirming an estrangement, an estrangement from place, from history and, his most radical assertion, from art itself.

If it is possible, despite the encrustations of conventional Australian art history which would have McKay as a Western Australian Modernist, to accept that estrangement is a – if not *the* – crucial aspect of his entire body of work, then it might be conceivable to appreciate that his practice, its assertion of an alien 'historylessness', undoes conventional categories. Unlike Robert Juniper whose strange landscapes make

Byzantine frescos of The West, and unlike Howard Taylor whose abstractions have the paddocks and forests of the South West alive with an ideal, purified perception, McKay has always turned away from the landscape and made of his work something neither Western Australian nor Modern, neither stylistically fixated nor concerned with picturing.

In his pictorial negations he has, despite the accommodating attractiveness of most of the work, created work that refuses to 'write over' the landscape as if the settlers' presence is naturalized in it and so has refused to presume an inevitable continuity in Western culture from the Ancient Greeks to the shores of Western Australia.

Through his meandering explorations of style and materials and signage, McKay has established a political art that is nascent and seldom recognized as such, an art that is more than Western, more than Modern.

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