

## Foreword

This book explores the reception of contemporary Australian art in the UK over a 15-year period between 1950 and 1965. It is a period that saw an Australian art boom in the UK, a brief decade in which Australian painting was 'discovered', augmented, historicized, and finally, re-absorbed back into the UK market. Australian art, often branded as an exotic product in the UK, had much in common with UK art of the same period: not only a shared ancestry in European traditions, but also in post-war trends such as neo-romanticism, *tachisme* and the School of Paris.

An archival and documentary methodology has been used to construct a micro-history of the curation and reception of a cluster of survey exhibitions of Australian painting, held predominately in London between 1953 and 1963, augmented by an exploration of the lives of expatriate artists in London, focusing on the period c. 1947–65. Most of the archive research was carried out at the Whitechapel Gallery, the Tate Gallery, and in Australia at the National Archives of Australia, the National Library of Australia, and the Art Gallery of New South Wales. Interviews were recorded with artists and critics either involved in these group exhibitions or associated with them, and now living either in the UK or Australia. I was greatly assisted by a number of the artists and critics with first-hand knowledge of the period, all of whom, without exception, freely offered me access to their personal archives and correspondence.

The 1961 Whitechapel and 1963 Tate Gallery survey exhibitions of Australian painting are of greatest significance and relevance to the Australian art world. Nevertheless, the Australian art boom in the UK during the early 1950s to mid-1960s and the associated question of a London-based Australian school of contemporary painting touch in a very real sense on UK social and visual culture of the period. Moreover, in Australia, *Recent Australian Painting*, selected by a UK gallery director and seen by few of the artists who participated in it, and even fewer Australian critics, is still judged mainly on the basis of the two catalogue introductions written by Robert Hughes and Bryan Robertson and the subsequent criticisms of Bernard Smith.

This book tackles group exhibitions of Australian painting within the context of the UK's post-war period, the transition from Empire to Commonwealth, and trends in UK art, in a prelude period to what has been termed 'the long sixties', in order to examine some of the reasons why Australian contemporary painting was so attractive to British curators, critics, and the exhibition-going public during this period. Although Australia's political directive in sending art overseas is an important factor, far more significant in the UK was the influence of Sir Kenneth Clark and Bryan Robertson in drawing attention to what they perceived as a new and dynamic school of contemporary painting. Whilst they shared friendship and similar artistic sensibilities, each had his own particular reasons for welcoming the influx of Australian painting into the UK's art world at a transitional point in its development during the 1950s.

The reception of Australian contemporary art in the UK during the 1950s and early 1960s is under-explored, as are the reasons underlying the appeal of Australian painting to UK connoisseurs, private collectors and critics during this period, and the place of expatriate Australian painters within the broader context of the UK art scene of those times. What follows is an attempt to fill or at least bridge these gaps, at the same time deconstructing some of the myths relating to Clark's 'discovery' of Nolan; the circumstances surrounding Robertson's selection of *Recent Australian Painting* and supposed curatorial leaning towards primitivism; and, using comparative tables, some of the background behind the selection of the much maligned Tate exhibition *Australian Painting – Colonial – Impressionist – Contemporary*.

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