

CRAIG GOUGH

“RESONANCE”

MAROONDAH ART GALLERY - 31 July 2014

I am greatly honoured to be given the opportunity to open this wonderful exhibition of Craig’s works, “Resonance”.

Let me begin with a personal thought on abstract art, the subconscious and the concept of “emotion” which are so intimately interconnected.

Having spent a working life in logic, constructive argument and rational deduction sourced from factual and provable data, the world of abstract art, along with its variant nomenclature has, for me, been elusive as thistledown pillars of hope.

It is convenient to remind oneself of the plain meaning of abstraction, namely – “to exist in thought or as an idea but not having a physical or concrete existence”¹. Having had a working life outside of art, my pursuit in understanding abstraction as a concept has been a journey into a brave new world.

I willingly confess that for a number of years, I have personally struggled to understand non-objective art and the various derivatives of abstraction, a journey which led me to the severely challenging seminal essay by Kasimir Malevich, “The Non-Objective World – The Manifesto of Suprematism”² where he explained:

“Two basic types of creation can be distinguished: one, initiated by the conscious mind, serves practical life, so-called, and deals with concrete visual phenomena; the other, stemming from the subconscious or superconscious mind, stands apart from all ‘practical utility’ and treats abstract visual phenomena”³.

¹ English and Oxford Dictionary

² Translated from Russian to German 1927 and to English, 1950

³ Dover Publication 2003 at p 11

Given my limiting background of essential logic, this has been quite a conceptual odyssey for me, as Malevich went on to explain, that the “visual phenomena of the objective world are, in themselves, meaningless; the significant thing is feeling, as such, quite apart from the environment in which it is called forth”. He explained that “feeling is the determining factor” and that “everything which determined the objective-ideal structure of life and of ‘art’ – ideas, concepts and images – all this the artist has cast aside in order to heed pure feeling”⁴.

In my pursuit over the years to understand the philosophical foundation of abstraction, I have journeyed through many confusing explanatory tomes. However, a more recent writing that made good sense to me, one that sat seamlessly with Malevich was penned by Arshile Gorky, who said that:

“The stuff of thought is the seed of the artist. Dreams form the bristles of the artists brush. And as the eye functions as the brains sentry, I communicate my most private perceptions through art, my view of the world. In trying to prove by the ordinary and the known, I create an inner infinity. I probe within the confines of the finite to create an infinity”⁵.

I point out that Jonathan Goodman, in his essay accompanying this exhibition, described Gorky as an “angelic messenger gifted with an astonishingly new style”.

With that background, I address my task this evening.

The title to the exhibition, “Resonance”, is significant.

Given this title, and reverting again to plain English, I understand the noun, “resonance”, in the visual sense, as being “the power to evoke enduring images, memories and emotions”⁶. In his artist’s statement set out in the Exhibition catalogue, Craig explains what he meant by “resonance” and referred to the “strong emotions” that may be captured when viewing the

⁴ Ibid p 67

⁵ Recorded in Action/Abstraction Yale University Press 2008 at p 15

⁶ English and Oxford Dictionary

“poetic nature” of art, referable to the works in this exhibition. It is, inarguably, a personal experience for each individual.

However, in my view, the driving factor is necessarily sourced from the artist’s essential sense of “self”. That is, the ability to transcribe subjective emotions, or feelings, that variously interplay in the progressive improvisation that supports the denouement, namely, the developing threads that is drawn together. The result speaks for itself in the canvas.

I well recall visiting The Latrobe Visual Arts Centre in 2011 and viewing Craig’s exhibition of 6 large and visually powerful panels. I felt quite overwhelmed by the universal grandeur of the presentation. On reflection, I was left with a dual sense firstly, of personal exaltation; and secondly, of inquiry.

By “inquiry”, I mean, what were the forces that compelled such evocative visual images within each of the paintings? One did not have to be Hercule Poirot to find the answer. There is posted on the Centre’s website a short video of Craig addressing those works, explaining they were about “feelings”, of having the viewer “experience something”, and “to become part of” the paintings. He clarified that the paintings were not about “the embellishment of something”, albeit they were derived from his garden which was, as he said, of “little significance except as the beginning” - a sort of the trigger for the journey into each work.

Each of the paintings in that stellar exhibition concerned a process whereby the small detail was eliminated and the focus was, as I understood it, upon a strong “feeling” for colour and how each of the colours interacted with one another. It concerned both shape and intensity. In opening that exhibition, Dr Vincent Alessi, then the Artistic Director, LaTrobe University pointed out that:

“ the fact that these tangible objects⁷ become secondary speaks volumes for the success of these works. It is the harmony of colour, the balance, the confidence which allows the paintings to take us to that spiritual and personal space”.

Craig described his paintings as “abstractly formalist, where everything in the work has to answer to everything else, so that the result is satisfactorily

⁷ There referring to the preliminary referential point of the garden.

resolved”⁸. Megan Spencer wrote, in reference to the LaTrobe exhibition, that Craig “pushes his colour to the extreme in scale and form, in the aim of evoking an immediate emotional response” from the viewers.

I have referred to this recent and seminal exhibition, as there is a clear conceptual continuum with the works shown here this evening.

The powerful essay by renowned New York based writer and critic, Jonathan Goodman, supporting this exhibition, forcefully addresses the overall imperatives of Craig’s paintings. I cannot, in the time available to me, do justice to this most elegant and insightful text, save to focus upon several observations made by him.

Goodman refers, for example, to a primary state of “emotional lyricism” to Craig’s art. That is, again in plain English, the “expression of emotion in an imaginative and beautiful way”⁹. He commented that Craig “builds (an) architecture of sympathetic emotion”, for his works “make a claim for feeling just as much as they occupy the mind”. Such non-objective or abstract hypothesis is, in my view, fundamental to Craig’s works.

It is essential to consider the underlying structure, or origin of these works.

Goodman refers to “Craig’s hints at figuration”, opining that the term, “abstractionist does not completely describe him”. He refers to Craig’s “delicate balance between figurative and non-objective art” and how the works “intimate landscape without directly reporting on it”. As I referred to earlier, the preliminary referential point or trigger for these works is the garden. It is from this source that Craig intuitively moves through a process of improvisation. That is, he breaks down the visually obvious and discards the superfluous in order to expose the intrinsic nature of each work. That aspect is well explained by Goodman with his illustrative references to *Primary No.2* (2014), *Blue Space 3* (2007) and *Primary* (2013).

The effective use of colour underpins the strength of Craig’s paintings.

⁸ Craig Gough – Maitland Regional Gallery and Touring Exhibition 2011

⁹ English and Oxford Dictionary

An underlying feature of Goodman's essay is his reference to Craig's dynamic use of colour, describing the works as "notable colour based abstractions", of "saturated colours", of "overlapping passages of colour", as being "luminous", and how they "aim toward (a) contemplative mind rather than try for aggressive stimulation". When referring to *Primary No.2* (2014), he noted how Craig relied upon "passages and fields of colour" that relate harmoniously to each other.

Goodman expressed the view that one of the strongest aspects of Craig's work was the way he balanced "colour with structure" and his appreciation of "how deeply a picture's interior framework supports his exploration in colour". He made the observation that Craig viewed "colour as a lifeline to perception" and that his "highly skilled use of colour enables him to communicate powerful emotions in his art".

It is plain that Craig is a master colourist which is powerfully evident in his work. He intuitively contrasts the intensity of one colour beside another and, as he personally explained to me, "I have to feel them; they can flicker, or shimmer even though the tonality can be the same, but to me, they differ"¹⁰.

There is an indispensable, indeed intrinsic and accomplished quality to Craig's paintings. When seeking to categorise his work, it seems to me that in a most profound way, he flouts the difficult boundary between abstraction and representation. When I reflect upon his life's journey, I also speculate whether his past life as a jazz musician was indeed the foundation for his gift of instinctively translating the intuitive medium of improvisation to the form, to the lines of defining edge, to the images and shape, to the structure, to the enrichment and modification of colour and in the result, the overall tonality of his art.

This is an outstanding exhibition of Craig's more recent works. We are all privileged to be part of the occasion and I congratulate Craig upon the excellence of the paintings displayed at this gallery. Importantly too, is the role that Lisa Byrne has played in curating the exhibition in such an Informed manner. The Gallery is indeed privileged to present this outstanding collection and I declare the Exhibition open.

¹⁰ 23 June 2014.

The Honourable Paul M Guest OAM QC