

Gender: Myths, Methods and Marginalisation

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Terry Eagleton has written that 'the goal of a feminist politics would ... not be an affirmation of some "female identity" but a troubling and subverting of all such sexual straight-jacketing'.¹

This paper will consider issues that arise from the art historical construction of modernism in Sydney in the 1920s to show the inappropriateness of the sexual stereotyping of the art practice and production of male and female artists; the stereotyping of the mainstream male artist working in the public sphere, whose work is exhibited, purchased and recorded in art history, and of the female artist who works in a more private sphere, whose work is rarely exhibited or sold and consequently is not recorded.

Although it is now being challenged by writers on literature as well as art historians, the general view of European modernism has been that of an aggressive forward thrusting—the masculine oedipal challenge to the status quo/father art movement, a masculine centred phenomenon—from the bombastic chants of the Futurists to the male oriented newspapers, pipes and guitars of the Cubist subject matter. While art historians such as Virginia Spate have evaluated the importance of Sonja Delaunay's designs in fabric work in the formation of her husband's cubist concepts,² and others such as Whitney Chadwick have pointed out Kandinsky's debt to Gabriel Muntzer, or reminded us that artists such as Picasso did a lot of decorative work, such as stage design, as well as their high art paintings,³ decorativeness and design, and women artists, still play a peripheral role in European modernism.

In Australia, since the 1960s, we have been regaled with a different story of modernism—not a his/story but a her/story, not an aggressive masculine art movement but a decorative, feminine one centred on women artists. This construction was made in Bernard Smith's *Australian Painting*, 1962, where Smith championed women artists and their work and practically ignored male artists of the period working in modernist (or other) styles. Smith's version of Sydney modernism has become the accepted one virtually until the present.

Bernard Smith himself accounted for the strength of women artists, as he saw it, in this period as resulting from the death of male artists in

the First World War.⁴ But a list of forty-four artists who served in this war in the Australian Imperial Forces records only two who were killed, and theirs are unknown names.⁵ The women artists such as Margaret Preston and Thea Proctor, whom Smith saw as dominating this period, were not young, untried art students at the time of the war, but established artists. The male artists of their generation were not killed but equally present and able to paint in a modernist style had they so desired. And if the dominance of women artists in Sydney was a result of the absence of male artists, why not the same occurrence in Melbourne? Smith listed only male artists as of importance there in the same period.

In claiming that the generation of male artists who could have been expected to introduce Cubism and Futurism into Australia were killed, Smith did not consider the evidence that there were articles on and reproductions of the work of artists such as Albert Gleizes, Juan Gris, Jean Metzinger, and Marcel Duchamp, as well as the first Futurist manifesto published in Australia as early as 1912, and that several books on European art styles were available.⁶ He also chose to ignore the fact that male artists such as Roy de Maistre, Roland Wakelin and Elioth Gruner had spent several years overseas in the early 1920s and had brought back knowledge of overseas modernism. Smith's favouring of figurative over abstract art led him to devalue the experimental work done by Wakelin and de Maistre that led to abstraction in 1919, and to leave unquestioned why this work was not pursued in the 1920s.

In the 1960s, in an effort to conform to the story of modernism constructed by the Museum of Modern Art, New York, Smith dismissed the work being done by the majority of male artists in Sydney—landscape painting—as reactionary and not worth considering. Although there were literally hundreds of artists working in this genre, in *Australian Painting* Smith referred to only one, Hans Heysen. Smith instead promoted the work of women artists and grouped a rather disparate collection of women artists into a vanguard movement which misrepresented what was really going on. For example, Margaret Preston and Thea Proctor were well accepted by the art establishment in the 1920s, not seen as a radical challenge to it. Other women artists named by Smith were either not well known in the 1920s or were from interstate or overseas, working in Sydney only a short time.

It would seem that in fact there were not more female painters active in Sydney in the 1920s than at other times, rather that the work being done by some women artists at that time differed from the work

being done by the majority of male artists; and that because aspects such as simplification of form, flatness and bright colours were an aesthetic shared by decorativeness and modernism, modernism was perceived at the time as a suitable, decorative, feminine style for women artists. Women artists practising this style (such as Preston and Proctor) were allowed to co-exist with male artists, and indeed could be safely admired, purchased and admitted to the committees of art societies.

Avenel Mitchell has pointed out that, for example, Thea Proctor was allowed to be successful at what she did because her work was not a challenge to dominant male genre; in fact her work reinforced male dominance.⁷ It was usually of women and children, disconnected from the outside world, in their own enclosed environment and often in interior spaces. Her media were prints, drawings, water-colours or painted silk fans—suitable female media—and her work was decorative and stylish. Mitchell has pointed out that Proctor, a single woman with no independent income, had to earn a living and so had to pursue an accepted style, and in this she was very successful.⁸

Margaret Preston did not have to earn a living and consequently her work was more adventurous, but still within the bounds of an acceptable female genre in that it was mostly flower painting, print making and decorative. Acceptable, that is, to the art establishment—the Art Gallery of New South Wales, smaller galleries, reviewers, relevant publications, and so on.

But while a decorative style was suitable for female artists it was not acceptable for male artists. A review in 1927 compared works by Preston and de Maistre as follows:

Mrs Preston's work, even though it struck with the full force of novelty, was based on principles and much to be preferred to the inconsistent and ill controlled luxuriance of the single flowerpiece of Mr. de Mestre.⁹

While the associations of women and decorativeness, and of decorativeness and modernity/modernism, allowed women artists practising a 'modern' style to be successful and enjoy a higher profile than at other times, it is also necessary to look briefly at the other side of this—why modernism was not considered suitable for high art and for male artists.

In the early 1920s Australia was plagued with a depression, lack of jobs, disgruntled returned servicemen, industrial strikes, and a major influenza epidemic.¹⁰ In what has been seen as bordering on a fascist movement, nationalism was fostered to counteract this social disruption. Australia was promoted as an agrarian paradise, free from the ills of

modern Europe.¹¹ Landscape painting, seen as symbolic of strength, vigour and nationalism, symbolised this ideal.¹²

I would suggest briefly a few challenges to this so-called 'male' genre of painting. First, a large proportion of the landscape painting done by male artists at this time was done in water colour—so we might ask why works that were associated with masculinity and nationalism and high art were painted in a medium previously the domain of genteel women painters and amateurs.

Further, most of the landscape paintings were painted in a style seen as being based on the so-called Impressionism of the Heidelberg painters. Impressionism has been seen by many writers as being a feminine style of painting. For instance, an article published in *The Lone Hand* in 1908 asked 'Are not the methods of the Impressionist School distinctly feminine? Clear tones, quick touches, cool lights, facile elegances left incomplete by willfulness or caprice'.¹³ The feminine aspect of Impressionism has also been mentioned by other critics and writers, for example, Griselda Pollock in her book on Mary Cassatt.¹⁴ So we might ask why a style, based largely on one that has been associated internationally with feminine qualities was seen as epitomising masculine qualities in Australia.

It has also been argued, by Margaret Plant, that around the time of Federation in 1901 Australian male landscape painters were domesticating and anglicising the landscape.¹⁵ Numerous works depicted homesteads nestling cosily in valleys and were painted with an unnatural greenness, more like England than Australia. Nostalgia for England resulted in paintings not of home, but of Home. Instead of coming to terms with modernity, male painters were regressing and domesticating the landscape—usually a female prerogative.

Having made the association of women artists and a decorative style of modernity, the picture of women in their traditional role and place, in reference to the work of Margaret Preston and Thea Proctor, I now want to modify that and argue that women in Sydney in the 1920s had a much more positive approach than men to aspects of modernity such as technology, the growth of cities, and the spread of suburbia and that these strong positive and forceful attitudes were reflected in the work of women artists. For example Grace Cossington Smith's work, *Eastern Road Turramurra*, 1926 (Australian National Gallery, Canberra) is a candid, in fact celebratory, depiction of suburbanisation, modernisation, and the destruction of the bush around Turramurra. In contrast, works by male painters, such as Robert Johnson's *Palm Beach to Barrenjoey*, c.1925, can be read as celebrating

nature and the Australian landscape untouched by civilisation.

This association of women with modernity can be argued further by looking at two products and symbols of modernity, the aeroplane and the Sydney Harbour Bridge.

In the light of the importance of the aeroplane to Australia, it is strange that it is more absent than present in Australian art. Australia was one of the pioneering countries in the development and use of the aeroplane. (The first flight took place in 1909 and by 1921 regular air services had been established. By 1927 'planes were manufactured in Australia and several airline companies flourished.) Dozens of magazine and newspaper articles extolled Australia as being particularly suited for aerial flight because of the long distances and the suitable geography and climate. Pictures of 'planes and aerial photographs taken from 'planes appeared almost daily in the press and frequently in advertising. It therefore seems strange that artists were not inspired by them. In Europe artists such as Robert Delaunay (*Homage to Bleriot*, p.c. Paris, 1914) and Roger de Fresnay (*The Conquest of Air*, MoMA NY, 1913), for example, saw the 'plane not only as a symbol of modernity but also as a key to explorations in the representation of time and space.

The few images of aeroplanes in Sydney in the 1920s and early 1930s were prints made by women artists. Ailsa Lee Brown's print, *Moths over the Quay*, early 1930s, shows several 'planes flying over Sydney Harbour. Lee Brown has identified with the pilots of the planes. The viewer is in another plane sweeping and looping, almost close enough to touch a fellow pilot, looking down on the scene of boats and buildings and water below. Although the work has decorative elements, such as the repetition of curved lines, it also conveys the feeling of a spiralling vortex—the feeling of dizziness and displacement and excitement Marshall Berman attributes to the experience of modernity.¹⁶

In contrast, in 'high' art and the work of male artists, the 'plane was ignored or denied. The only image I'm aware of made in this period, within the institutional category of high art, is Arthur Murch's *The Aeroplane*, 1927 (private collection). The figures in the work are depicted looking sky-ward but the plane is depicted only in absence, not even a shadow.

Similarly, in works of the Sydney Harbour Bridge, women artists can be seen to embrace modernity more successfully than male artists. Grace Cossington Smith's *The Bridge in Curve*, 1930 (National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne) shows the bridge structure in a dramatic and

forceful way and, with the halo effect above the joining of the arches, can be read as a celebration of modernity. In contrast Roland Wakelin's *The Bridge under Construction*, 1928-9 (National Gallery of Victoria), although showing cubist innovations, is softer, less dynamic, and less celebratory than Cossington Smith's work.

Comparably, Jessie Traill did a series of extremely detailed etchings of the construction of the Bridge, such as *Building the Harbour Bridge IV*, 1929. In these works she displayed great technical knowledge and skill. This has been seen by present art historians, such as Tony Fry, as claiming a right to a male domain of knowledge.¹⁷ Similar contemporary comments were made about Traill's work. One reviewer wrote that there was 'an entirely unfeminine side to her art';¹⁸ and another, that 'Because the artist is a woman, you may perhaps conclude that she would be unable to grasp the problem in dynamics which this great span of steel presents, but there you would be wrong'.¹⁹

I would like to propose one reason why women artists in Sydney seemed to be better able to relate to modernity than male artists. I think this ability was due to women's experience, especially during the First World War. Although modernity in Sydney has been described mostly in terms of women, style, fashion and design,²⁰ there was another side of modernity equally related to women but far removed from wealth and fashion. Atina Grossmann has written, 'The new woman was not only the intellectual with a Marlene Dietrich-style suit and short mannish haircut, or the young white-collar worker in a flapper outfit. She was also the young married factory worker'.²¹

The employment of women in factories in Sydney in the 1920s has been recorded as follows: 250 hosiery and knitting mills employed 6,000 women out of 7,000 workers; dressmaking and millinery industries employed 14,000 women, 95% of total employees; women were employed in food and drink, book binding, printing and paper, and wrapping and packing industries.²² The large employment of women, although initially given impetus by the lack of male workers during the first World War, was probably continued because of the lower wages paid to women—in 1919, in the clothing industry, for instance, 54% of the male minimum.²³

Women workers were depicted in the press. For example the Australian magazine *Sea, Land and Air* started in 1918 and was aimed at those interested in new technology (one would assume men). It also carried a surprising number of articles and photographs about and showing women, mostly women factory workers. The first issue carried eleven pages of photographs of women's work in war time—

almost fifty images of women working in industry, with the text that if women had not been recruited to industry the armies would have been paralysed and Germany would have won the war.²⁴ The photographs showed women very actively engaged in shipbuilding, making large-scale munitions, stoking, blacksmithing, installing hydraulic pumps and servicing locomotive engines. In 1919 the magazine ran a further series of six articles on women in the work force. The titles alone of the articles were inspiring, for example, 'Woman's Share in Victory at Sea and in the Air' and 'Woman's Invasion of Industry'.²⁵

Paradoxically, middle class women were shown in advertisements in the magazine as still being very much entrenched in the home. Yet all women (and men) reading it must have been made very much aware that working class women were associated with industry and manufacture, even more than men; that it was women who were mustered to industry to meet the greatest demands yet put on technology; and that it was women who were successful in the endeavour. It was women who felt the excitement of having the challenge, thrill and satisfaction of meeting the massive production needs to support the war. In Australia, because of its physical separation from the actual site of battle, as women did not directly experience any of the ill effects of wartime technology (the physical destruction that Europe suffered) their experience was largely positive.

Working in industry was a liberation for women in Australia, a place to channel energy into worthwhile work. It was men who returned war-weary, bitter and disillusioned by the destructiveness of technology, who saw factory work only as, at best a mundane job, at worst as a continuation of evil. It was women who were able to ally themselves positively with technology/modernity. It was men who sought refuge in the unchanging (as they wished to see it) landscape.

Although works such as Cossington Smith's Harbour Bridge paintings are seen today as icons of Australian modernism, they were not seen that way in the 1920s and 1930s, and were often rejected when submitted to exhibitions. It was the non-threatening, decorative, feminine type of modernism that was acceptable. Male (and female) artists working in a less decorative modernist style were marginalised and unable to make a living. Paradoxically, in Sydney it was female artists like Cossington Smith and Jessie Traill, who had independent incomes, who were able to continue working in a more 'masculine' modernist style. Male artists were forced, by necessity, to modify their style, as did Roland Wakelin; or to seek patronage through

networks of friends and supporters who were more interested in the artist than the art, as did Roy de Maistre.

It is worth dwelling briefly on de Maistre. After leaving Australia for England in 1930, rather than operating in the public/male sphere of art production, he depended on a complex network of private associations—a private rather than a public space, a space more usually considered feminine/female.

As soon as he arrived, he installed himself on the fringes of the avant-garde. In 1930 he held an exhibition with Francis Bacon, the latter showing rugs and furniture and de Maistre showing paintings.

De Maistre was befriended by Dimitrije Mitrinovic, a Serbian socialist philosopher who, after an active and radical political career, fled from his own country in 1913 to Munich, where he became associated with Kandinsky and the Blau Reiter group.²⁶ In 1914 he moved to England, was a regular contributor to A. R. Orage's magazine *The New Age*, and lectured on his own rather esoteric ideas of creating a new Christendom. In 1932 he started a magazine, *New Britain Quarterly*, changed in 1933 to the *New Atlantis*, which published several reproductions of de Maistre's works.

It is probable that de Maistre met Mitrinovic through Gladys MacDermot, an Irish national who, while living in Sydney from 1925–30, patronised some of the most important modernist works of de Maistre, Wakelin and Cossington Smith. She continued her patronage of de Maistre in England and extended this support to include Francis Bacon (who said on one occasion that the most important thing de Maistre did for him was to introduce him to MacDermot, as she kept them both fed²⁷). MacDermot financed one of Mitrinovic's magazines.²⁸

De Maistre also benefited from the patronage of Sydney Courtauld and her husband Rab Butler, whom he had first met in Sydney. Butler commissioned work, offered him a job as their social secretary, and in 1937 purchased for him the studio and home he used for the rest of his life.²⁹ (Butler also purchased the furniture made by Francis Bacon from another of de Maistre's friends, Patrick White.³⁰)

In 1934, de Maistre had an exhibition in the Mayor Gallery, opened in London in 1933 by Douglas Cooper and Fred Mayor and one of the first galleries regularly to show the work of modern European artists such as Picasso, Braque, Miro, Ernst and Klee.³¹ Cooper however later denounced all Cubist painting except that by the four great masters, Picasso, Leger, Braque and Gris. In an attempt to help finance his own work and that of other artists, de Maistre and a friend

Robert Wellington, with Robert Medley and Henry Moore, in 1936 planned a scheme similar to the London Artists Association.³² The idea was based on an artists' co-operative, and among the artists included were Francis Bacon, Ivon Hitchens, Henry Moore, Graham Sutherland, John Piper and Ceri Richards. The proposal never came to fruition but in 1937 ten of the suggested artists held an exhibition in Agnew's Gallery, London. (It was financed by Eric Hall, Francis Bacon's companion and friend of de Maistre, and endorsed by Kenneth Clarke and Herbert Read.) The exhibition received unflattering, though extensive press coverage.³³ The exhibition was seen in terms of a second-class version of the some months earlier first London Surrealist exhibition. Where the presence of Salvador Dali and the exaggerated works in the latter inspired some awe, if not approval, this exhibition attracted mostly ridicule and was generally assessed as an imitation of the work of continental European artists.³⁴

De Maistre showed three works. One, titled *Arrested phrase from the Colour overture for a Film Ballet*, was a continuation of his work on colour-music started in 1919 in Sydney, when he devised a series of scales and charts allying colours to particular musical notes and produced the first abstract paintings recorded in Australian art history. In 1937 de Maistre wrote a synopsis of a what he called a film ballet in colour.³⁵ The script has been preserved and traces through four scenes of a fanciful but figurative ballet. Although he was still interested in this project in 1947 and wrote to Samuel Courtauld at that time asking him to try to interest J. Arthur Rank in making a film of the ballet, the film was never made.

This very sketchy mapping of some of the intertwining networks that characterised de Maistre's life in London indicates the complex pattern of networks, friendships, arrangements, self-help groups and so on that de Maistre was involved in. This more amateur method of survival, of relying on friends and family and personal contacts, is an area, a private rather than a public space, that has been claimed for women and extended to the work of women artists (by art historians such as Lucy Lippard)³⁶ and to writers. For example Astradur Eystensson in *The Concept of Modernism* describes Shari Benstock's work in reclaiming women writers for modernism and 'retracing a female subtext' as a 'palimpsest deciphering', a 'feminization of the modernist paradigm'.³⁷

In *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics*, Rita Felski questions the validity of some feminism's emphasis on the notion of difference, and the extension of this notion of the feminine as oppositional to seeing the

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'female aesthetic' as a version of the aesthetic position that can be articulated by any non-hegemonic group and that results in a collapse of fundamental distinctions in ideology, social position and cultural politics. There is an appeal to an undifferentiated notion of negativity, which in turn is equated with female or feminine. She writes also that 'the notion of the feminine absolutizes a particular relationship between women and culture', and that this position is unable to account for the many different examples of feminist cultural production.³⁸ I would extend this further. The concept of the 'other', and the claiming of the 'other' to masculine production for women artists, not only lumps together and masks different aspects of feminist production, but also excludes the production of male artists who work outside the mainstream of production.

In this paper I have tried to show the importance that gender has achieved in the discussions of modern art in Sydney in the 1920s, and to indicate that neither a simple binary division between the work and practice of male and female artists nor an association between gender and ways of production or marginalisation is appropriate or possible.

Notes

- 1 Terry Eagleton, 'Nationalism: Irony and Commitment', in *Nationalism, Colonialism, and Literature*, Minneapolis, eds T. Eagleton, F. Jameson, Edward W. Said, 1990, p.24.
- 2 Virginia Spate, *Orphism*, London and New York, 1979.
- 3 Whitney Chadwick, *Women, Art, and Society*, London, 1990.
- 4 Bernard Smith, *Australian Painting*, Sydney, (1962) 1971, p.198.
- 5 *Art in Australia*, 6 (1919) (no pagination).
- 6 J. F. Williams, 'Modernism and the Lost Generation', *Art and Australia*, 19, 1 (Spring 1991): 52-59, p.128. See also, for example: 'Post Impressionism and the Racinistes', *Bulletin*, 23 February 1911, Red Page; 'Verandah Art', *Bulletin*, 16 November 1911, Red Page; 'The Cheerful Cubist', *Bulletin*, 20 November 1913, Red Page.
- 7 Avenel Mitchell, 'Thea Proctor 1879-1966: Aspects of Elitism 1921-1940', Fine Arts IV thesis, Sydney University, 1980.
- 8 *ibid.*
- 9 H. H. Fotheringham, review of 1927 Society of Artists exhibition, *Home*, 8, No. 10 (October 1927): 266.
- 10 Geoff Batchen, 'Gruner in Retrospect', *Art Network* (Spring 1983): 9.
- 11 Bernard Smith, 'The Fascist Mentality in Australian Art and Criticism', *The Communist Review*, 58 (June 1946): 182-4; and 59 (July 1946): 215-217.
- 12 J. S. MacDonald, 'Arthur Streeton', *Art in Australia*, 40 (15 October 1931): 22; Mary Eagle, 'Modernism in Sydney in the 1920s', ed. A. Galbally and M. Plant,

- Studies in Australian Art*, Melbourne, 1978, p.89.
- 13 Henry Verne, 'The French Impressionists', *The Lone Hand*, 3, No. 15 (July 1908): 305-7.
 - 14 Griselda Pollock, *Mary Cassatt*, New York, 1980.
 - 15 Margaret Plant, 'The Lost Art of Federation: Australia's Quest for Modernism', *Art Bulletin of Victoria*, 28, National Gallery of Victoria (1987): 111-129.
 - 16 Marshall Berman, *All that is Solid Melts into Air*, (1982), New York, 1988.
 - 17 Tony Fry, 'A Bridge Across Time', *Old Worlds. New Visions*, Sydney, 1989, pp.108-135.
 - 18 'Jessie Traill', *The Age*, 20 June 1929, quoted in Queensland Art Gallery, *Industry and Nature. The Etchings of Jessie Traill*, 1989, p.10.
 - 19 Blamire Young, 'Woman Artist's Drawing of Great Harbour Bridge', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 8 July 1929, *ibid.*, p.10.
 - 20 Eagle, pp.79-89.
 - 21 Atina Grossman, 'The New Woman and the Rationalisation of Sexuality in Weimar Germany', in *Desire. The Politics of Sexuality*, eds Ann Sitow, Christine Stansell and Sharon Thompson, London, 1984, p.192.
 - 22 Kathleen Ussher, *The Cities of Australia*, London, 1928.
 - 23 Sol Ensel, *Women and Society. An Australian Study*, Melbourne, 1974, p.155.
 - 24 'Women's Work in War Time', *Sea, Land and Air*, 1, No. 1 (15 March 1918): 25-36.
 - 25 See *Sea, Land and Air* (April 1919): 10-12; (May 1919):100-101; (June 1919): 167-70; (July 1919): 216-19.
 - 26 Andrew Rigby, *Initiation and Initiative. An Exploration of the Life and Ideas of Dimitrije Mitrinovic*, New York, 1984.
 - 27 Francis Bacon, Interview with writer, July 1988.
 - 28 Rigby, p.134.
 - 29 See my forthcoming *Roy de Maistre. The English Work 1930-1968*, Sydney, c.1994.
 - 30 David Marr, *Patrick White*, Sydney, 1991, p.155.
 - 31 Mayor Gallery records. I am indebted to Andrew Murray, director, Mayor Gallery for access to these records and for his help.
 - 32 R. Wellington and R. de Maistre, Untitled, unpublished ms., de Maistre papers, Tate Gallery archive.
 - 33 Agnews Gallery, Press Clipping Books; further information in my forthcoming 'Roy de Maistre'.
 - 34 For example, 'Art Exhibition', *New English Review*, 21 January 1937.
 - 35 'Synopsis of a Ballet film in Colour', unpublished ms., de Maistre Papers, Tate Gallery archive.
 - 36 Lucy Lippard, 'Introduction', *From the Centre. Feminist essays on women's art*, New York, 1976.
 - 37 Astradur Eystensson, *The Concept of Modernism*, New York, 1990, p.90.
 - 38 Rita Felski, *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics*, Cambridge, Mass., 1989, pp.43,47.