

POINT TO POINT – PLACE TO PLACE

In November of 1982 this unaccommodating painting was hanging in Sydney's Gallery A. For the month before that, it had hung in the Axiom Gallery in Melbourne – before that it was in New York where, of course, it had been conceived and executed. January 1983 found it hanging in the Art Gallery of New South Wales as part of the Archibald/Wynne/Sulman exhibitions. It is with delight then, but no surprise, that I discover our globe-trotting artifact today in Perc Tucker Regional Gallery, Townsville. *Point to Point – Place to Place* is living up to its name.

I hope in this short analysis to demonstrate that it is also living up to its reputation. As a preamble, let me re-introduce you to John Firth-Smith.

He was born in Melbourne in 1943. The childhood years from 1945 to 1952 were spent in New Zealand. His family returned to Australia at the end of this period, and Firth-Smith finished his secondary education. Although he attended the Julian Ashton Art School, he is largely self-taught. His influences come from British artists like Davie, William Scott and Keith Vaughan – all of whom were then represented in the Art Gallery of New South Wales. It would be erroneous to detect direct traces of the New York School in his early work. In Firth-Smith's own words, "there were no books on American painting around then or paintings in galleries. It would have been a great time to see 'Blue Poles' ". Instead he absorbs Aboriginal and ethnic art from local museums, and clearly takes a peek at the European COBRA group whose work was reasonably documented.

At this formative period we find the artist cadging more home-grown clues, notably from Olsen and Fairweather. In the middle-late sixties our painter has a full-blooded flirtation with the whimsies of Pop, including an extensive use of collage and, contrarily, with the austere verticalities of Barnett Newman (post 1971). By about 1972 he has distilled a recognizable, consistent style, confining himself to formal, non-representational mark-making with a marine flavour. He becomes associated with the abstract interpretation of Sydney Harbour, its boats and surfaces.

It is during the seventies that Firth-Smith consolidates his position in the front rank of Australian painting, finding representation in all the major State Galleries as well as the National Collection in Canberra. Appropriately, Firth-Smith is also represented in the far-ranging Regional Galleries – Newcastle, Shepparton, Geelong, Grafton, Bathurst, Broken Hill, Dalby, Mildura, Windsor and, significantly, Townsville. (His work *Cajun* entered this collection in 1974.)

On record is the long list of international festivals and expositions at which Firth-Smith has been chosen to represent Australia. His chief commercial outlets speak for themselves . . . Ray Hughes in Brisbane, Gallery A in Sydney, Axiom, Realities and Powell Street in Melbourne, and Bonython in Adelaide. He has even, rather sheepishly I imagine, received the accolades of the business world by completing a massive commissioned mural for the new ANZ Bank in Melbourne. I am not familiar with this work but it is reputed to be the most intelligent and sumptuous item of public art in the country.

Lacking the notoriety of a Brett Whitely, or the specialist following of a Peter Booth or Juan Davila, Firth-Smith's unspectacular enduring visibility may be explained by his sheer confidence as a manipulator of paint. His attack is always brisk, alert, vigorous; his effects elegant and lush. In criticism it may be said he has been somewhat unemotional.

That is, until the *New Work, New York* series of paintings of which *Point to Point – Place to Place* is the turbulent acme.

Firth-Smith spent most of 1982 working on this series in New York and he seems to have opened himself to radiant, bitter power. The art fashions of the time (they still dominate) were the new Expressionism and the gallery-approved Graffiti, both of which allowed, even demanded, a loosening up of technique. In typical earlier works, Firth-Smith's shapes hug the sides of the canvas leaving an uninflected field of colour in the middle, but in these new works, the activity is evenly or centrally disposed.

Previously elusive, the personality of the artist is now revealed, and in *Point to Point – Place to Place*, so emphatic in his exposure, the artist seems physically present.

Many of the *New Work, New York* pictures resemble snow-slushed pavements covered in the tracks and trails of human movement. A sort of motorcross in mud. *Point to Point*

– *Place to Place* has less of this snow effect, but I think it must come late in the sequence, suggesting a summer dating. It is unquestionably in terms of ambition, size and drama, the most challenging easel picture Firth-Smith has painted. My view that it is also a successful, serious and handsome creation does not really count here, but I would like to continue my study of the piece through objective data.

*Point to Point – Place to Place* is painted in acrylics. The paint has been generously applied to a fine stretched linenweave. The picture is hinged bodily, midway across for ease of transport. It is unframed, and measures 274 cms by 366 cms (9'x12'). A shale-grey flattish ground was laid in first, into which the artist has registered his lines and swatches of white, red and black. Brushes and spatulas have rendered the paint, with some direct pourings of fairly viscous pigment. Firth-Smith used his fingers and there is a great deal of deliberate wiping and smudging, indicating the use of a cloth or sponge. He would have required a ladder since the picture was vertical during the entire process.

Apart from its dimensions, the most salient feature of the painting is a large hole shape.

Firth-Smith holes are a subject in themselves. These circular forms which characterise many of his canvases have been described variously as portholes, clock-faces, lenses, mandalas, banjos, even plug-holes. The most charming interpretation is that they are a memory of the tin lids which Firth-Smith uses as palettes. It is not, however, what they are but what they do that matters. In *Point to Point – Place to Place* the great focal disc in blackest acrylic slams into and holds down an area of otherwise chaotic fury. It is echoed on the right by twin arcs and rings. Its radii give an impression of spinning which lures, draws down.

In any logical hanging of the picture, I think this disc would be at average eye level – so that, while it is not the physical centre of the canvas, it is the human centre, the heart.

Memory Holloway, the *Age* critic, attributes Firth-Smith with the remark that he could look through the earth and see Australia, reversed. In their comics, Americans dig thru' to China; well, Firth-Smith, with combined patriotism and nostalgia, has dug through this black hole in New York to discover his own country! The disc, then, is perhaps an escape hatch, an exit wound.

What are the lines? As already suggested, they evoke the habitual paths trodden by people and vehicles. They could also be the plot lines on a nautical or celestial chart, or the flight paths of jets, or merely graffiti. Firth-Smith's experience of New York's graffiti was a revelation to him. Certainly, it will not be hard for some to see *Point to Point – Place to Place* as a rough cast wall covered in unexceptional examples of that art, but more than this is intended. Interviewed by Cathy Peake in *Financial Review*, Firth-Smith said:

“Even after a ten month stint painting in New York where the street graffiti had an enormous effect on me, plus trips to major art capitals of the world . . . I remember the Aboriginal Rock Paintings (of Arnhemland) as the most timeless and moving things I saw . . . I occasionally had the feeling that in some areas the paintings might have had the same sort of function as Western graffiti . . .”

In the same interview, the artist says:

“the whole of the Arnhemland Escarpment looks like a didgeridoo sounds. It's obscure, abstract and it sort of buzzes.”

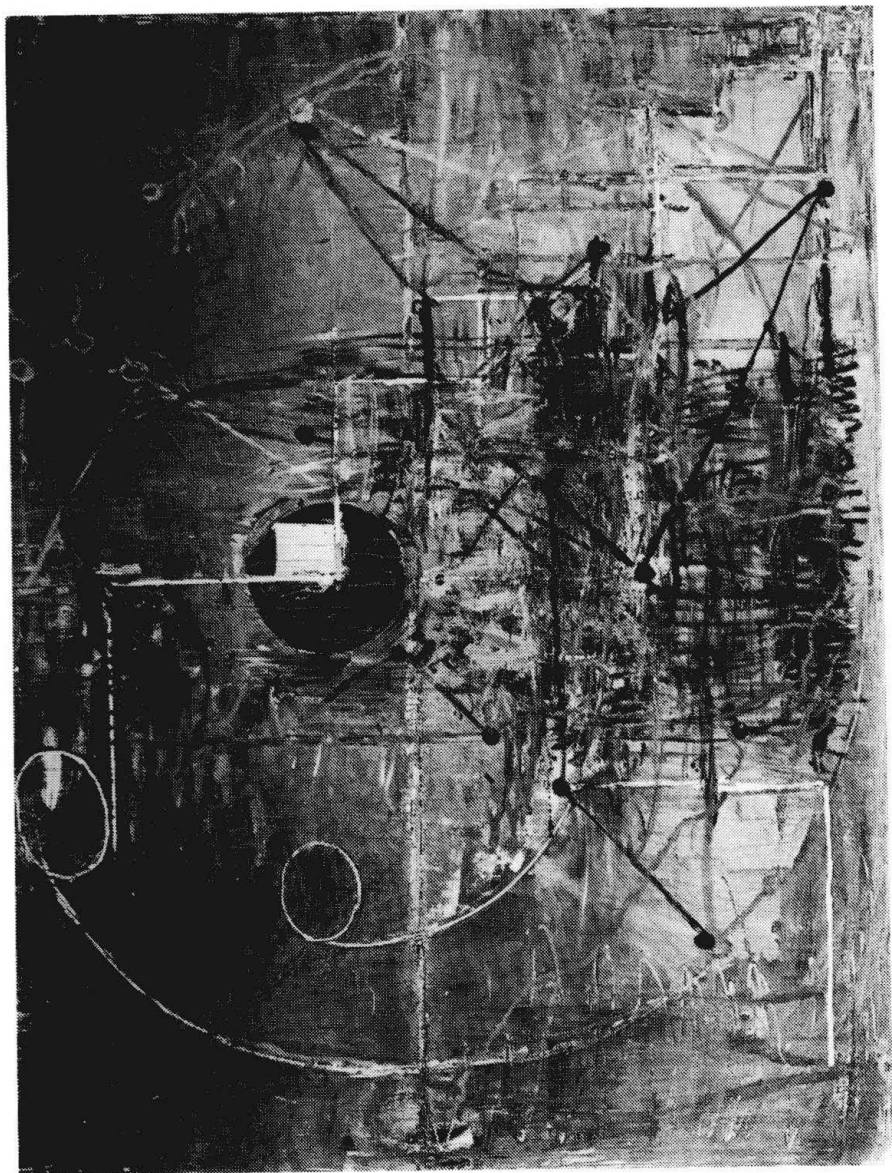
This statement is uncannily close to Gauguin's on Brittany:

“When my clogs ring out on that granite soil I hear the dull, muted, powerful tone which I seek in my painting.”

Firth-Smith's powerful tone reverberates from the Australian landscape. *Point to Point – Place to Place*, you see, while it begins in and about New York, becomes hectically and intensely about Australia. Up to the point where it is about brutish trudgings in New York City, it is a failure. I believe Firth-Smith saw it as such, saw the painting's dilemma as his own, and in an excited self-aware gesture, cast a great calming net, the shape and colour of Australia, across the disordered image. I fancy some, but not many, marks were added or modified, but the casting of this net effectively resolved the painting, gave it its tone . . . its buzzing.

Until 1982 Firth-Smith is a reductivist producing non-specific, even multinational art pieces. His harbours, his oil-slicked tides, the crusted flanks of his freighters, give the scent of Glasgow and Singapore as much as of Sydney. But *Point to Point – Place to Place*, while it remains legible in that context, must be read as an undiluted and frankly Australian work of art.

There is a lot of thinking aloud in the painting. The artist changes his tack often, I think of him working his canvas like a



John Firth-Smith's *Point to Point – Place to Place* has been acquired by the Perc Tucker Regional Gallery with assistance from the Visual Arts Board of the Australia Council.

sailor, altering with circumstances to make headway. Some of the paintwork is turgid and scarified as a result, but some is opalescent and pristine. There is everywhere animation and flux. Despite its 'messiness', *Point to Point – Place to Place* gives off a sharp, clean glimmering you could not mistake. Few painters get such silver from such blacks and greys. Nor is there one to rival Firth-Smith's attainment of the mineral, ocherous sheen of our continent.

I suppose I am saying how optimistic I find it. The temptation was to produce an heroic, pitiless fugue charged with New York's spiky claustrophobia, but Firth-Smith injects humaneness and good spirits, almost despite himself, to create this unmelodious anthem of a thing – a thing like the sound of a didgeridoo.

Sub-themes of Time and Distance are in operation here, lending the work a philosophical chassis. To scrutinize these would, for the moment, only deflect our attention from its primary qualities . . . immediacy and physicality.

If I can add a very personal observation, I am like the painter who, in the face of Frans Hals, was inspired to paint, and, in the face of Rembrandt, wanted to give up painting. Firth-Smith is not Rembrandt. But, as a painter, he communicates so directly with us that we crave, ourselves, to paint. Wherever it comes to rest, this picture, regardless of being good or poor, sublime or ugly, admired or reviled, will act as a generator in that community.

These are at least, my reflections; I think *Point to Point – Place to Place* is a big enough work to absorb many others.

Bruce James presented this critique as an introduction to *Point to Point – Place to Place* in the Perc Tucker Regional Gallery, Townsville, on 8th August 1983.