

IS THERE A NORTH QUEENSLAND SCHOOL OF PAINTING?

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Many artists have become indelibly identified with special subjects, or, in the case of landscape artists, with particular regional or topographic colours, patterns and forms. In Australian painting, one associates Drysdale with the scenery and the people of the arid "outback". Even those painters whose work is based on less realistic themes - the "myth-makers" and "romantic-legend" artists - are in many cases intimately associated with an identifiable locale. Ned Kelly rides through a landscape which is equally Victorian topography and Nolan imagination; Tucker's explorers stride through obviously Dandenong forests; Guy Grey-Smith's abstractions are often as indicative of the West Australian sand plains as a surveyor's report; Western Victoria is clearly the home of Arthur Boyd's half-caste shearers.

Does a similar situation exist in the north? Have the artists created from the landscape, the people, and their own imaginations, a characteristic idiom?

Somehow, it seems that the answer is no. No particular painting or painter immediately springs to mind when the words North Queensland are heard, in the way that forests of ghost gums and aboriginal names do at the mention of Alice Springs.

Certainly, many of Australia's more important painters have worked in the area and have commented, through their art,

on the region and the inhabitants. Donald Friend clearly enjoyed North Queensland and, with his tongue well into his cheek, recorded facets of life that he considered were significant to the people. However, it is for other works that Friend is so highly esteemed. Douglas Annand produced glowing watercolours, capturing the strange feeling of the rain forest, but is better known for his murals of marine sprites. The landscapes which Charles Bush painted around Townsville were good paintings but they have not created any legends.

Of the artists who may be considered as resident, rather than itinerant, possibly Arthur Evan Read in the fifties, and Ray Crooke in the sixties are the best known names. The former has captured the atmosphere of the sugar districts and mill towns perfectly. His paintings make the viewer feel certain he knows which street it is, which town it is, and which day of the week it is, as well as feeling that he can smell the molasses. These works are distinctly regional in subject, yet are outstanding pictures anywhere.

The works of Ray Crooke have, in general, attempted a difficult subject - that of the figure and the landscape viewed both together and apart. His human figures may be considered as studies of people but they become more significant topics when their landscape backgrounds are given equal cognisance with the human forms. Nevertheless, with the exception of the Thursday Island series, it is difficult to identify his people and places with any locality beyond the general classification of Australian (since many of the figures are aboriginal) and tropical (since the vegetation is typical of warmer regions).

The paintings of Russell Drysdale, and their subjects, their styles, forms, colours, and their fame have fixed them forever as part of the generalised inland. They are Drysdale landscapes behind Drysdale figures, rather than any particular place. Similarly, the two North Queensland series of Nolan pictures are very distinctly Nolan paintings, and less

specifically rainforests and drought areas.

Somehow, these artists have remained individual stylists, and there does not seem to have been any group or school of followers.

If we approach this topic on the broader scale of international art patterns, the main trends and fashions of the last decade have been the various forms derived from abstract expressionism. In this style of painting, it is usual to think of the subject matter as being secondary, and the artist and his attitudes and feelings of primary importance. Nevertheless the environment must have some effect on these attitudes and feelings which the artist wishes to express. The marked differences in style and theme which are characteristic of the contemporary painters of Britain, New York, California, Japan, Sydney, and Melbourne must to some extent reflect the environment or the artist's attitude to it.

So far, the North Queensland locale does not seem to have stimulated the production of any major abstract works. Coburn lived many years in the cane country, and Matthews' early years were spent near Ingham, yet there is no suggestion of these years in their abstract paintings.

We may well ask, does this matter?

Alternatively, we may wonder why or how this situation has arisen.

It is probable that some of the contributory factors are related to the geographic distribution of the artists and the art-buying public in Australia. Both these groups are gregarious, and often metropolitan. This, then, means that only a few artists have become interested and familiar with the life of a non-urban region, and thus few comments in paint, have been made about such an area. When such subjects are used, perhaps the gallery-going public views these works as exotica rather than serious statements.

Perhaps, too, the continual repetition of the "dry ancient landscape of the dead heart" story has brought us to a state where the eerie blues and browns of the rainforest, and the lush greens of sugar cane, are almost alien to us, sufficiently alien to be considered with Gauguin rather than Heysen or Drysdale.

Is it too late, in 1966, with art a markedly international activity, to think in terms of regional painting irrespective of whether it is abstract, representational, expressionist, "pop", or the next new vogue? Obviously, with the distinct styles that have evolved on the international scene, the answer must be no - there are still regional or group viewpoints.

So far this attitude, viewpoint, or environmental influence has not developed in North Queensland. Whether this is related to the artists, to the public, to the environment, or to a combination of these factors is debatable, but perhaps the future will provide an answer.