GORDON SHEPHERDSO

PAINTINGS FOR AN AUDIENCE OF ONE

Work from the 1990s
It could be regarded as odd to think of something we might call Australian romanticism, either as a genre or where a single artist or group of artists give expression to its historically accepted disposition. The Angry Penguins fit nicely as do paintings from the 1960s by Arthur Boyd. Other lyrical painting is an observed expressionism - John Perceval, for example - or a painterly symbolism like the late and seemingly endless repertoire of Nolan, where his familiar literalism offers a well-worn meaning, of sorts.

Charles Baudelaire summed up its temperament, ‘Romanticism is precisely situated neither in choice of subject nor in exact truth, but in a way of feeling’.

Subjective vision need not exist as an extreme and turbulent expression of an observed world, its circumstances or particular material fact. It can, of course, but in Gordon Shepherdson’s case it’s where an impulsive and intuitive mind transcends any sense of literalism. We are familiar with figures running, nudes held within dark and menacing space. Bulls and open-winged birds and images drawn from literature and religion are each the well-spring for allegories developed within his rich imagination. They are painted without pictorial forethought - the act of painting and its physical process defines the declarative strength of his art.

I know this from personal experience. He painted my portrait and I sat for it. His studio - the shed - is a small space at the bottom of a scruffy-verdant back yard. He paces, settles, talks, offers a beer while stalking a large white sheet of paper clipped to a board on an easel. Silence, total silence, descends then a few staccato lines mark the surface, then brushes and fingers take over.

In half an hour or so he needs a break and it takes a while for his mind to calm and he settles. Nothing is an affectation and his natural humility and self-doubt consume the space. I choose not to disrupt the pause in an incomplete momentum and don’t get up to look at the work.

***

Gordon Shepherdson sits within a familiar pattern of Australian art historical circumstance. He has always lived in Brisbane, a place where a localised expressionism became something of a tag for local modernism. Early in his career and in Sydney, Rudy Komon (Gallery) picked him up. Artists admired his work. He continued to exhibit commercially and in 1997 the Queensland Art Gallery presented an exhibition of painting from 1979 (cont.)
to 1996. He is represented in the National Gallery of Australia and many state, regional and university galleries. To my mind he is the natural consequence of the uncritical acceptance of the repeating blast of Australia’s art historical canon. He doesn’t appear to us as figuratively post-Antipodean let alone playing some Australian card. His interests are vast, and colloquial one-liners never appear.

Exhibitions like this help in reshaping our perceptions of the past, and with next-generation curiosity perhaps comes the prospect of seeing and placing his art differently.

While his work might be familiar, it’s never formulaic. The works in this exhibition hold an all-pervading certainty where black and white as massed and negative space compress the imagery and intensify its sensory experience. The use of half-tones is interrupted with blood-red flecks which amplifies drama. Figures are framed within compositions - open and closed space - and remind us of earlier art historical suggestions and discreet symbolic references to freedom and restraint.

The exuberant expression, those sightless eyes and masks - exaggerations and awkwardness - lead to a sense of intense vulnerability. They really are paintings for our time.

Doug Hall AM
November 2017
Family Triptych - Man, Woman, Adolescent 1991 oil and enamel on paper 150 x 103 cm (each)
Man in a Wardrobe with Masks 1994 oil and enamel on paper 139 x 119 cm
GORDON SHEPHERDSON CV

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES
1934 Born Brisbane, Queensland
1948-9 Studied at Gatton Agricultural College, Queensland
1950 Worked as Office Clerk in Accounts Section at the Department of Primary Producers, Brisbane
1950 Six months jackeroo and farm work in Longreach area, QLD
1951-52 Night classes with Caroline Barker of the Royal QLD Art Society
1952-53 Worked as ‘passerboy’ in Evan Deakin’s Shipyards, Brisbane
1954 Began work in a Brisbane abattoir
1956 Married Noela Portley
1960 One term at Central Technical College, Brisbane with Arthur Evan Read
1961 Attended classes with Andrew Sibley (painting) & Jon Molvig (drawing)
1962 Archibald Prize Finalist, Art Gallery of New South Wales
1974 Archibald Prize Finalist, Art Gallery of New South Wales
1976 Archibald Prize Finalist, Art Gallery of New South Wales
1977 Survey exhibition held at the UQ Art Museum, Brisbane
1980 Awarded the Georges Art Prize, Melbourne (acquired)
1990 Awarded the Tattersall’s Club Landscape Art Prize
1997 Survey Exhibition held at the Queensland Art Gallery

SOLO EXHIBITIONS
2017 Paintings for an Audience of One: Work from the 1990s
Nicholas Thompson Gallery, Melbourne
2015 A Small Survey of Later Work Nicholas Thompson Gallery, Melbourne
2013 Philip Bacon Galleries, Brisbane
2010 Postcards & Other Paintings Philip Bacon Galleries, Brisbane
2001 Paintings Brian Moore Gallery, Sydney
2000, 1997 Philip Bacon Galleries, Brisbane
1997 Marks + Moments (Survey Exhibition) Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane
1994, 1992 Philip Bacon Galleries, Brisbane
1989 Paintings Philip Bacon Galleries, Brisbane
1986 Recent Paintings (Logan & Albert River, Still Lites) Philip Bacon Galleries, Brisbane
1984 The Swimmer Series Solander Gallery, Canberra
1982 The Swimmer Series Philip Bacon Galleries, Brisbane
1980 Moreton Island - Morning to Evening. Drypoints Philip Bacon Galleries, Brisbane
1979 Works on Paper: A Collection of Recent Etchings and Oils on Paper
Philip Bacon Galleries, Brisbane
1977 Gordon Shepherdson (Survey Exhibition) UQ Art Museum, Brisbane
1976 Portraits Philip Bacon Galleries, Brisbane
1972 Reid Gallery, Brisbane
1968 Rudy Komon Gallery, Sydney
1967 Grand Central Galleries, Brisbane
1965 The Slaughter Yard Georges Gallery, Melbourne
1965 The Slaughter Yard Rudy Komon Gallery, Sydney
1964 The Slaughter Yard The Johnstone Gallery, Brisbane

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS
2017 Ecstasy: Baroque & Beyond UQ Art Museum, Brisbane
2015 GOMA Q: Contemporary Queensland Art QAGOMA, Brisbane
2014 Remembering Brian & Marjorie Johnstone’s Galleries UQ Art Museum, Brisbane
2013 New V3: Recent Acquisitions UQ Art Museum, Brisbane
2011 New 2011: Recent Acquisitions UQ Art Museum, Brisbane
2009 Between Reality and Non-Reality: Works by Jon Molvig And Gordon Shepherdson QUT Art Museum, Brisbane
1991 Diverse Visions Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane
1988 Painters And Sculptors: Diversity In Contemporary Art Museum Of Modern Art, Saitama, Japan
1987 Painters And Sculptors: Diversity In Contemporary Art Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane
1986 Five Queensland Painters Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane
1982 Georges Invitation Prize Exhibition, Melbourne
1979 Macpherson, Shepherdson, Staunton UQ Art Museum, Brisbane
1966 Design Arts Centre, Brisbane
1966 Contemporary Australian Painting Australian Trade Display, Los Angeles
1962 Moriarty - Shepherdson Hardy Brothers, Brisbane
1961 Travel Inn Art Panels Festival Hall, Brisbane

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY
Bell, P. ‘Gordon Shepherdson’ Art and Australia, Vol 15, No 4, 1978
Churcher, B. Molvig, The Lost Antipodean Allen Lane, Melbourne 1984
Germaine, M. Artists and Galleries of Australia Boolarong, Sydney 1984
Horton, M. Present Day Art in Australia Ure Smith, Sydney 1969
Lingard, B. Past and Present Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane 1986
Rainbird, S. & Muddiman, S. Selected Australian Works: Queensland University of Technology Art Collection QUT, Brisbane 1995
Smith, B. Smith, T. & Heathcote, C. Australian Painting 1788 – 2000 Oxford University Press, Melbourne 2001

COLLECTIONS
National Gallery of Australia
National Gallery of Victoria
Queensland Art Gallery | GOMA
UQ Art Museum, Brisbane
QUT Art Museum, Brisbane
Griffith University, Brisbane
University of Western Australia, Perth
Central Queensland University, Rockhampton
Ararat Gallery
Art Gallery of Ballarat

Collections
Gold Coast City Art Gallery
Ipswich Art Gallery
Lismore Regional Art Gallery
Moreton Bay Regional Council Gallery
Mornington Peninsula Regional Gallery
Museum of Brisbane
Newcastle Art Gallery
Rockhampton Art Gallery
Stanthorpe Regional Art Gallery
Toowoomba Regional Art Gallery
ABOVE: Girl Holding Masks Walking into Reality 1993 oil and enamel on paper 108 x 118 cm

COVER: Girl on Steps with Four Masks 1991 oil and enamel on paper 150 x 107 cm (detail)