

UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH AUSTRALIA ART MUSEUM

**ANNA PLATTEN:**  
Paintings and studies 1982-1992

30 July-29 August 1992

## ANNA PLATTEN:

### Paintings and studies 1982-1992

Erica Green

*'There is art that looks radical and art that looks conventional. By now we should be suspicious enough of the avant-garde to be prepared to suspend judgement on which is really which.'*<sup>1</sup>

This exhibition presents a survey of paintings and studies by Adelaide artist Anna Platten, selected from her work of the past ten years. The exhibition reflects the University of South Australia Art Museum's interest to periodically draw attention to the achievement of an Adelaide artist, by examining their work in relative depth at an appropriate time in their career.

It is intended that artists will benefit from such solo exhibitions through the opportunity of seeing their work more comprehensively displayed, and in context. Hopefully, this might translate as fresh insights and critical encouragement, promoting further artistic development.

The exhibition is not intended to be read as the consolidated oeuvre of a fully mature artist. Rather, what we see is the developmental (but determined) progress, over a decade, of an artist who is increasingly confident and in control of her materials, methods and intentions. Because the survey represents the large part of her output since 1982, we can also see that she works slowly, as well as with great care.

Platten's passionate commitment is to the expression and communication of her feelings, rendered through narrative paintings, objectively constructed in a traditional manner, and rich in sensuality and symbolic detail. A feature of her painting is its disciplined and lucid technical facility, which, in her more recent works, is combined with a growing sophistication in judgement of subject matter. Whereas the early paintings can be seen as cautious experiments in technique and content, the later works, by comparison, possess a gravity and authority which resonate with delicious mystery and qualities which resist easy conclusions.

Despite claiming to admire much about current art, Platten has declared herself uninterested in the intellectual discourses of contemporary art and what she sees as the pursuit of fashion. It is the paintings of van Eyck and Velazquez, which Platten herself cites as primary influences, describing van Eyck as 'pure, emotionally profound, rich in detail, information and meaning'.<sup>2</sup>

'In that era', she says of the Flemish School period 'everyone knew the meaning in the symbol of the virgin and crucifixion, and if the artist painted these subjects in a new way - or changed them - everyone understood. Now, every single artist has their own individual language making communication difficult'.<sup>3</sup>

When she saw Velazquez's *The Maids of Honour* at the Prado in 1984 (an experience which caused her to weep), she was moved not only by seeing Velazquez's work in the original, but by the beauty of detail. In one of the children's portraits, for example, she observed that 'the rose in her hair reflects in her face, which glows'.<sup>4</sup>

While Platten's professed influences are therefore not Australian, or modern, it is unavoidable that her work will be placed and judged in an Australian context.

In this respect, it could be suggested that the central theme, or code, in Anna Platten's art is its tendency towards surrealism, a particularly recognisable Adelaide characteristic.<sup>5</sup> If justified, such a proposal inevitably raises the larger spectre of Australian modernism, when analysing her work.



*Woman and man in embrace, 1992, Courtesy of the artist*

In her ground-breaking exhibition and publication, *Classical Modernism: The George Bell Circle*,<sup>6</sup> Felicity St John Moore demonstrates the link between Australian surrealism, and the classical modernism of the George Bell School.<sup>7</sup> George Bell converted to modernism after twenty five years of traditional practice and was the principal influence in the development of Australian classical modernism. He was also the disseminator of 'a style that originated in the school of Paris in the 1920's, a time when artists like Picasso, Braque, Derain and Léger, sought to reconcile their modernity with the timeless qualities of the classical tradition.'<sup>8</sup>



detail, *Woman painting wardrobe*, 1987, Courtesy: Private Collection

Through teaching, Bell influentially promoted a kind of modernism which was grounded in form, and a belief that this could be taught through drawing, composition, craftsmanship and a study of the old and modern masters.

Because 'the qualities that are generally identified with the Bell stream of modern art are those of formal discipline, objectivity and classical design',<sup>9</sup> it is therefore tempting to suggest a tenuous line between Platten and Bell, notwithstanding Bell's rejection of narrative painting, and the fact that, apart from surrealism, Platten's preoccupations reveal little rapport or engagement with modernism.

As Felicity St John Moore has shown, Bell's ideas were adopted and transformed by artists (with his encouragement), to express a personal vision or temperament in a manner which invariably departed from traditional values. However, it is ironic that, in an era when principles in art-making have generally lost coherence, Platten's pursuit of her own vision (and the means to express it), seems to be leading her inexorably to the world which Bell abandoned.

In 1992, when artists such as Gerhard Richter confidently (and expertly) employ the techniques of traditional painting, to support complex strategies in contemporary art-making, it would be unwise to conclude that Platten's traditional method is without radicality, or for that matter, relevance.

However, what distinguishes her art is the personal nature of its content and exposures. Her project is very genuinely a quest for self truth, and is uncompromisingly on her own terms.

Notes:

1. Richard Kalina, discussing photo-realist painter Ralph Goings in 'Freeze Frame', *Art in America*, March 1992.

2. Anna Platten, interview with Erica Green, June 1992.

3. *ibid.*

4. *ibid.*

5. For a comprehensive account of Adelaide surrealism, its origin and context, see *Adelaide Angries: South Australian Painting of the 1940's* by Jane Hylton (published by the Art Gallery Board of South Australia, 1989).

6. Felicity St John Moore, *Classical Modernism: The George Bell Circle*, exhibition and publication, National Gallery of Victoria, 1992.

7. For example, through the work of Peter Purves Smith, Russell Drysdale and Eric Thake, (op. cit. St John Moore, pages 67-92).

8. Felicity St John Moore, 'Bell's Modernism Travels Full Circle', *The Australian*, 28 May 1992, page 8.

9. St John Moore, op. cit., *Classical Modernism...* page 67.



'Day Piece for Julia', 1989, Courtesy of the artist

## TRANSITIONS AND BONDS

George Couvalis

The best of Anna Platten's meticulously crafted paintings deal with problems raised by important transitions and bonds; such as becoming a woman, marriage, uniting natural passion with civilised comforts and barbarisms, and transforming oneself into a woman artist who neither becomes banal through imaginative timidity, nor loses touch with reality. I will illustrate the ways in which she deals with these problems through an analysis of four pictures, and then discuss how her recent work suggests resolutions. As her work subtly combines elements to present a view, it can only be understood by attentive analysis.

In the early *Man watching girls playing cards*, girls are engrossed in play overseen by a benevolent rabbit, an ironic comment on the serious risks biology will make them confront. On the right hand side of the picture, a fading naive representation of natural transition with its beautifully simple drawing of a butterfly has been rewarded with a glossily 'real' star putting society's seal on the illusion. At one end, the illusion becomes a bed decorated with childishly radiant flowers which has a waiting man with an unseen gaze apparently directed at the fireplace, his hands between his legs. An omnipotent viewer identifies with the gaze from above, and seems to thrust the girls into the cavity. In the viewer's world, the dominant underpants push a tie with a snake like pattern at a passive pair of panties with an open hole. A vibrant painting, though too contrived in comparison to the recent *Girls with hoop and ladder*, which is more subtle and avoids the trap of only showing girls as victims.

*Girls with hoop and ladder* is a mature depiction of the same transition as an outstanding performance set in a vast old theatre. The central figure is in control of her coming womanhood, though she is somewhat too serious and clutches the hoop with a left hand which seems too thin to move it easily. The younger girl, who looks down on her sister by climbing a male ladder with facility, adopts a showy pose; yet she cannot displace her sister as she is, in the end, a passive audience.

Marriage is dealt with in several paintings. The most interesting, *Vessels of Blood and Air*, deals with marriage as a problem about both male/female bonding and uniting animal feeling and civilised practice through showing the complex advantages and disadvantages of bonds. Woman is in control through her guarded embrace and through her gaze. Her bridal crown is the ambiguous gifts of civilisation, a fiery historical mix of romantic medieval, industrial, and nineteenth century buildings which the male ribbon enters by sneaking a ribbon through her hair and by the side of the romantic gate (only to be trapped after having avoided one factory). Her bridal dress is a silky embroidered kitchen curtain, a softly crafted domesticity.



*Girls with hoop and ladder*, 1990, Courtesy: Private Collection

The male, who waves about his pretty ribbons as if to stress the fact that his wooden embrace really is delight, has an arcimboldo head which consists of brutal and benign animals. His shark's mouth threatens, but the rabbits seem cute, and his flowery necklace presents a rough textured contrast to the bridal gown. He looks at us through a nature whose variety obscures the meaning of its gaze. The key to success is to be found in her hair, which



*Self portrait in studio*, 1992, Courtesy: Dee Jones

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moves in a swirl and becomes the embrace of her right arm, echoing the wilder movement of the ribbons, but with the grace of a more regular curve. An exciting and complex picture which subverts traditional images by showing active civilised woman in control at the top of the picture in contrast to natural man below her.

The claustrophobic *Self portrait in studio* is formally very fine. The black line behind the painter's head which seems to continue through her divides the picture in two. The upright bottles, brushes, and ladder on the left of the picture are balanced by the close mass of the wall on the right, the tubes of paint being passive, except for the red tube which arches into activity. Another important line begins with this red, runs through her golden hair, along the line of the dummy, and ends in a mirror highlighted by the red triangle. The two lines together help to centre the picture near the well lit part of the painter's hair, but squeeze her towards the wall and make her look small. The imprisoning wall has cross beams and bars. The table in front of her holds her in the corner. She would like to fly to light, but can only show herself posing as a painter; her vision an unreal dummy with a bright head that fails to reflect her, a vision prevented by the dark ceiling from taking her out of the humdrum. The dummy seems to have been put there by ascent on a male ladder, and its falseness is connected to this. The artist's glory is shown in a beautifully lit still life on the left which is, however, undermined by the dried up flower.

*Self portrait in studio* illustrates both Anna's success and what she has failed to resolve. First, she displays fears and ambivalences with disarming honesty. Second, like the paintings of her great mentors, Velazquez and van Eyck, her recent paintings have both a purely painterly value and reveal a great deal. She integrates colours, masses, textures, and light in a beautiful way, but her paintings also have considerable expressive power and reveal women's deeply felt desires and problems in a way which makes more fashionable works look pretentious. Yet she doesn't only work her effects by using naturalistic techniques. *The Bride* shows a capacity to work with line, form, and symbol which has been incorporated into later works in a way that is sometimes hidden in her apparent naturalism. Like other realists, she uses various techniques to confront us with the importance of human problems. A bleak irony is that by showing that she doubts her ability to do anything but construct empty naturalistic still lifes, she does much more.

Her view is sometimes too bleak, though some recent paintings suggest qualified resolutions through trying to retain what is useful in traditional images by transforming them. *Girls with hoop and ladder* uses an image of willowy femininity, but combines it with a

figure whose persona shows great resolution in an awesome setting. It thus announces the appearance of women who can take control while continuing to be women. *Woman and man in embrace*, gives an image of a cautious and somewhat ambivalent bonding prefigured by 'Vessels of Blood and Air', but is more convincing. I hope she will move to a tentative solution to the problem of being a woman painter in a male world.

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