

ARTIST PROFILE *by Carrie Lumby*

**Andrew McIlroy** is a newly Sydney-based artist, originally from Melbourne.

As a child, McIlroy demonstrated a natural graphic ability but was never encouraged to pursue art professionally. For someone with such considerable early talent it is surprising then that it is only in the last two years that McIlroy seriously considered art as a career and moved to painting full-time. On the other hand, it is perhaps understandable for someone of his generation and the pressures he faced as a young man to pursue a 'real' career.

Since his return to his original passion, he has come along way in the notoriously hard to crack art world. Initially, he established a studio above his local pub in an inner-city suburb of Melbourne in 2002. During this time McIlroy quickly experienced but appreciated the messy realities of being a struggling artist. As he says:

"The paintings would hang on out of the way walls or in closed off stairwells to actually dry sometimes. It was almost a short lived tenancy when a local felt compelled to run his hand over the painting, discovered it was wet and wiped his hands on and around the remaining pub walls."

His obvious talent has been formally recognised by the fact that he has succeeded - in a very short space of time for an emerging artist - in gaining commercial representation in both Sydney and Melbourne.

After originally focusing on a more traditional style of landscape - the hallmark of the Australian tradition - his work matured quickly and demonstrated an originality that makes defining his work within the conventional constraints of such a tradition elusive.

As a contemporary artist working within what are still considered traditional aesthetic genres and modes, in particular the landscape and figurative painting, McIlroy's work manages to be refreshingly free of the burden of post-modern politics without being reactionary - no mean feat in such conservative times.

His later landscape paintings, in particular, have an uncanny ability to tread the aesthetic and political fault-line between the Western colonial perspective of the Australian landscape and the indigenous one. In fact, McIlroy's distinguished work is indicative of a more sophisticated re-invigoration of the landscape which is gaining force in contemporary art circles.

McIlroy's original Sydney dealer Richard Martin reinforces this way of viewing his work: "I saw freshness to his approach of depicting the Australian Landscape. It is difficult, if not impossible, to come up with an entirely original concept in Art. Something that hasn't been done before. But I like Andrew's mix of traditional landscape with very contemporary overtones."

A new feature of McIlroy's practice is his experimentation with the figure which shows, even more explicitly, his aesthetic facility with colour and composition. Moreover, these pictures demonstrate that while he continues to experiment with a range of styles and influences, there is something aesthetically distinct to his eclectic approach.

At first glance, the viewer may, at times, recognise the iconography of the masters of both the Australian and European traditions. McIlroy, however, employs these in unique ways in order to create an almost surreal way of looking at what has been seen before. This draws the viewer into the picture and, at the same time, the pictures themselves stare back and hold the viewer's attention, sometimes in an unsettlingly way.

An excellent example of this aspect of McIlroy's work is his recently completed Portrait of a Rabbi. Initially, one is reminded of the classic portraits by Titian or the later works of Rembrandt. But the more one gazes at the painting, the more one comes to realise its uniqueness. McIlroy has combined the technical facility of the grand masters with the surreal touches that make his work so fresh and interesting. It is in the way the hand of the figure, although emerging through the dark drapery of the robes still somehow seems to stand alone as an object in itself. It is this strangely ambiguous aspect of the overall composition of the picture that is particularly mesmerising. This has been an underlying theme throughout his works but whereas his earlier landscapes could be captioned 'curious', this portrait is a high point. It is a disturbing picture. One that commands contemplation and demands answers to unknown questions.

The relationship between what, on the surface, appears to be very different modes of pictures - his landscapes versus his primary figures for example - demonstrates the way in which McIlroy's practice is motivated by the "struggle to capture Australian-ness without reacting against European influences or composition".

In an even more nuanced sense, McIlroy explains his motivation as an "aim to blend the European Colonialist landscape style, for example in the tradition of Buvolet, with the post-modern landscape approach". In this way, McIlroy circumvents the conventional dichotomy between the 'traditional' and the 'avant-garde'.

In some senses then, it could be argued that the subject matter of his work is not content but form. For example, the use of strong colour, particularly luminous red, yellow and ochre underpainting are employed to allow the underpainting to "break through and capture light". While not overlaboured "the use of paint quantity", as Martin says "gives a fuller richness to the work."

While McIlroy continues to draw inspiration from nature and remains fascinated by skies, horizons and tree scapes these are not literal depictions. As his painting is studio-based the end-product significantly departs from any empirical image. In the same way, while his figurative work references classical Renaissance portraits, McIlroy does not see these works as portraits in themselves. Rather they reflect the same mood that is evoked in his landscapes. The result is a more cohesive practice than may be initially apparent.

His aims as an artist are modest. In his own words:

"I hope to make people pause for just a moment. My inspiration is simple. To make a beautiful contemporary painting which is familiar, tangible and enduring. I focus my time and thoughts on familiar genres to achieve this and to ensure my work does not evolve away too far from our unique Australian milieu.

I want to live a life doing something that is not merely transactional. I want to paint my environment and only stop at a stage when my mind or body gives up on me."

McIlroy is certainly an artist to watch. He already shows maturity and style in his work but is still considered an emerging artist. As such, his work remains very collectable for the astute investor.

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