

ARTHUR BOYD

Speech for the Opening of *An Active Witness*

By Robyn Archer AO

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[ This version laid out for public speaking]

I begin by acknowledging the traditional custodians of the land we meet on, and pay my respects to their elders past and present, and also acknowledge any Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and other First Peoples here this evening.

What can one say more of Arthur Boyd? The word iconic is over-used, but his paintings surely deserve that title. What springs most immediately to mind are landscapes which have a kind of human life, not 'peopled', but alive in themselves, muscular, and intelligent; while the people of his world are always more than simply human. They are emblematic, mythological, and present something much more than mere humanity. The characters of Boyd's paintings are imbued with the lessons of both real history and invented allegory.

It's fascinating to see this exhibition, not only in the context of the Museum of Australian Democracy's over-arching theme this year, *The Art of influence*, but in the context of the Centenary of Canberra.

At the moment we are surrounded by the Canberra story – especially at the National Archives of Australia with *Design 29* where Marion Mahony Griffin's beautiful, and rarely shown, renderings are hanging, and at the National Library of Australia with *Dream of a Century: the Griffins in Australia*, which shows so much of that couple's work in Australia and in India. Last year I had the good fortune to be shown around the Griffins' Chicago by that city's cultural historian, Tim Samuelson.

Not only did I get to see the mid-city studio in which they worked on the Canberra design, but many of the houses they built, and especially Tim's old school, just up the road from Marion's mother's house ( where Marion eventually died). In that school hangs a huge mural, painted by Marion. It demonstrates perhaps better than any other work by her, Marion's skills as an artist in her own right, and portrays a world not of buildings and plans, cities and their landscapes, but of faeries.

This is no twee fairy story for kids, but a statement of Marion's deepest beliefs – she *believed* in faeries. She writes about them in her rambling ( unpublished, but you can find it online) memoir ( post Australia, post India, along the way to her descent into dementia) *The Magic of America*. There's a clue to her beliefs even in the title.

Marion believed that if you lived a good life, the faeries were always around to look after you. *Her* world was one in which you didn't have to go out of your way to pay obeisance to any particular god. The power to recognise good and evil was ever-present: all *you* had to do was be good in life and work, and you would be looked after. It's hard to know what she made of Walter's premature and untimely death in Lucknow – clearly *not* looked after, despite a good life: but it perhaps goes some way to explaining the unsentimental way in which she departed India so soon, leaving him in an unmarked grave, returning briefly to Castlecrag in Sydney and then home to Chicago. There is something about the acceptance of fate in all that.

It seems to me that there is something similar about Arthur Boyd – not faeries or fatalism, but a kind of sense throughout his work that good and evil should be self-evident. And if things are wrong with the world, of course you acknowledge those ills. You don't brush them under the thick carpets of privilege, but confront them with immediacy and lightness, and speak up about them; that's natural.

There is nothing self-congratulatory about the way Arthur Boyd spoke out. Largely, he let his paintings speak for him – and that voice was, contrary to his own, a loud one. The 1988 etching *The Australian Scapegoat* which references Simpson and his donkey, could not be louder in its protest against war. And the catalogue interestingly comments that he was :

Not only criticising bad behaviour but, like the morals of Fairy tales, suggesting contemporary legends can also be Catalysts for reflection on recent behaviour.

Those faeries again.

At every point of his mature life, it seems to have been the most natural thing for him also to join the chorus of protest against things which were unjust, and inhuman : sins against humanity were not tolerated, nor, significantly, were those against the landscape whose beauty inspired him time after time in different parts of the world.

I had the privilege of being invited to give the Arthur Boyd Memorial Lecture last year in London. The lecture series is designed to focus on Australians who have been successful in the UK. It was his friend, Barry

Humphries who gave the inaugural lecture, and *he* focused very much on Arthur himself. Barry was followed by Peter Porter ( with whom Boyd collaborated ), designer Mark Newson, architect John Barrow, and then me. It drove me, of course, to do more reading about Arthur Boyd; and that left me in no doubt that what I would call his 'honesty', this quiet yet steadfast ability both to paint the things which disturbed him and to speak out as a private citizen against them, proceeded from an upbringing which may have appeared from the outside chaotic and eccentric, but was robust in terms of values and a sense of ethical behaviour.

In the lecture I drew a couple of simple parallels – one was that , like Arthur, when I eventually got to London for the first time ( he at 39, me at 29), I headed directly to Hampstead ( home of my late mentor John Willett) and Arthur headed not just to Hampstead , but even before he stepped inside his accommodation there, was taken to Kenwood House to see a painting . Kenwood is where the memorial service was held for John Willett – and where I learned so much more about him.

The other parallel was that of the master/apprentice relationship between my father and me, and between Arthur's and his. In my case, I apprenticed myself to a singer, compere, stand-up comedian. In Arthur's case it was to a father who was both artist and artisan, a potter who pursued his craft with passionate dedication, and with his son right under his nose.

And the largely self-taught, again I use that word 'muscular', approach to art was surely what built such resilience into the young Arthur Boyd, and was one of his own stated reasons for leaving Australia for the first time.

He was not only desperate to see the great paintings of the European masters, but wanted to get away from what he called in his own words 'shaping up' to the 'tyranny of the academic bully boys'.

His relationship with his art was not theoretical, it was an apprentice's hands-on acquisition of love for materials, first the clay of his father's work, then the paint he lived and breathed when working in his uncle's factory: this skin on skin relationship with raw materials, coupled with the same kind of immediate relationship to content made strong magic inside the budding artist. Whatever you saw and felt, whatever reaction you had to the experience of life, need not be arbitrated or moderated, by fashion or respectability: it could be rendered physically and directly through the materials he lived and breathed.

The public may well be familiar with Arthur Boyd as a household name, a famous artist, and many will recognise the paintings and an equally familiar style: but what they will not know is the relationship of both painter and paintings to the real world Boyd inhabited. Because the content of the works is so poetic, and so rich in visual impact, the works are more often read as mythical fantasies or pure landscapes, than political statements.

While his first experience of Aboriginal people, and their living conditions in central Australia, shocked him, the famous Bride series has so many apparently mythological dimensions, that the paintings do not read as social commentary. The painting *Land Rights* from 1981, however, is unmistakable.

The same can be said of paintings such as *Progression* from 1941 and *The Cripples* from 1943, with their echoes of German Expressionists on the same themes, on the opposite side. The impact of war was deeply felt by Arthur, and he did not resile in any way from portraying its effects and aftermath. The ink on paper works immediately strike us in the same way as those of George Grosz , for instance, painting and drawing in Germany, might – as a direct commentator/critic of war. The series *Spare the Face Gentlemen Please* and *Mars* come very close to Grosz.

But in fact, Arthur Boyd has less in common with Grosz than he has with Grosz's contemporary, the poet and playwright Bertolt Brecht. Brecht's dramatic technique was always to set his commentaries on the horror, the waste, the injustice and the hypocrisies of war, in a time zone other than the present. His play *Mother Courage and her Children* is set in a much earlier period at the time of Europe's Thirty Years War. The epic dramatic thesis on justice, *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*, is also set in an ancient past, and his overtly anti-Hitler play ,*The Rise and Fall of Arturo Ui* is also deliberately removed from the immediate context of the exact period of Hitler's domination.

This is also Boyd's inclination: often to take what he felt as horrors of the present, and place their essence into an historical or mythological context. If his shock at the appalling treatment of Australia's First Peoples surfaces in the *Bride* series, and the pacifist leanings of both himself and his religious family are visible in his rendering of the aftermath of war – the disfigurement and scarring of the human body , the Vietnam War is central to *Nebachudnezzar*. I read that this painting

was created after Arthur witnessed the self-immolation of a protestor in London; but what the painter does is reach back into biblical mythology to give us the opportunity ( as Brecht so consistently did) to view it in a wider and deeper context , less emotional, more objective, than just the passion of the present. At the painter's hands, and in his poetic imagination, this war is criticised not just as a modern conflict with dubious contemporary motives, but one which harbours echoes of horror and injustice that go back thousands of years. It is enough to anger the ancient god of the Old Testament, the prophet of the Hebrews, the gods of Greek mythology.

This methodology, in the hands of both Brecht and Boyd, avoids a hectoring stance: it sets incidents or scenes at a remove from the immediate present so that audiences or viewers have the *choice* to react or respond. It should be clear that what is portrayed is disturbing, and sometimes disturbing enough for us to act on it – but if not, there is nothing that can drive or force a person to live a good life, with a good moral conscience. It's back to Marion's faeries – live well, and you will be looked after. It's up to you, and whether you are empathetic to the harshness of this world, or not. These are the dimensions that this exhibition reveals. Audiences will be made party to the immediate, societal, source of many paintings which they may previously have interpreted only as stories from the past, or an excursion into mythology in an Australian setting.

This exhibition will be a revelation to many viewers , especially those who had not thought of Boyd in a social and political context. And this is really the point of *The Art of Influence* – to demonstrate the many connections between art and conscience , comment and policy.

One of the great revelations of my first visit to Leningrad, as it still was in the 1980s, was the splendid nature of tour guide commentary there. The written panels and talking guides (audio or human) for structures like St Paul's or Notre Dame, St Peter's or the Palais de Pape in Avignon, rarely touched on the human cost of such edifices to god. But in Leningrad no such sins of omission were perpetrated. "This cathedral took 30 years to build, at a cost of x amount of money, and the loss of so many hundreds of thousands workers in the process". I liked that. I found it enriching to know how many poor sods had spent their lives in hard labour and died on the job. It placed the grand buildings in human perspective and refused to gloss over that horror, as non-communist countries tend to do, in deference to the glory of god, king, and architect.

I feel like that about this exhibition. It shows the immediate social commentary that one of our greatest and most celebrated artists intended. Boyd's paintings are *not* just beautiful, poetic, colourful works of pure imagination, or observations of the Australian landscape into which the painter pops the characters of ancient stories. Many derive from heartfelt empathy for those on whom the scales of justice weighed heavily and unfairly. Even the landscape itself was viewed empathetically by this artist, again not just for its great beauty and visual stimulus, but in the interests of long term sustainability.

When Arthur and Yvonne Boyd eventually sought property in the Shoalhaven area, and finally established Bundanon, he openly opposed actions which would damage that landscape, and took up defence of the environment.

And this of course, is pertinent to the Boyds' legacy. That Bundanon was cared for so well, and then , in the ultimate generous moment of a good life, gifted as a serene and collegiate place for artists to develop their work, is all testament to that empathetic spirit which pervaded Arthur's entire life.

It starts to build a great picture doesn't it ? A shy boy, deeply connected to home and an earnest, religious , creative family life; a boy who quit school at 13 and would probably now be labelled with what are called 'learning difficulties', a young man who took forever ( years) to propose to the woman who would become his wife: drafted into the army, a young man whose innate sympathies with pacifism made his term in the forces extremely unhappy. This was a man who, as he developed his art very much on his own terms, and grew an admirable reputation, also supported The Aboriginal Treaty Committee, led by H.C. Coombs, and subsequently contributed a painting for a 1981 exhibition and fund-raising auction to 'Artists for Aboriginal Land Rights', who marched for peace, donated to anti-war causes, and protested against the potential disasters of both nuclear warfare and environmental carnage.

It is often the case that the political life of an artist becomes submerged beneath the reputation that his or her art establishes. The splendid final product becomes divorced from both the less glamorous and more imperfect artistic process, and the private life. In many instances this is what the artist wants: they want the work to speak for them - this is particularly prevalent amongst those authors, for instance, who eschew Writers Festivals; Cormac McCarthy is a good example of a writer who wants to be judged on his writing alone.

In some cases, the 'other' life is deliberately suppressed. In the realm of my own work on the material produced by Brecht, and his composer/collaborators Weill, Eisler and Dessau, it's been interesting to see the efforts made, post the death of his widow Lotte Lenya, to sanitise the creative output and reputation of the composer Kurt Weill. His symphonic and chamber works and his Broadway musicals have been promoted over the seminal work he did with Brecht, and there have been clear efforts to disassociate him from that 'old Communist'. Even certain translations have been disallowed (those that keep too close to Brecht and his socialist sympathies) if you want to perform the original score of, for instance, *The Threepenny Opera*.

This was certainly not the case with Arthur Boyd. If we know less about his political life and his empathies beyond art itself, it is because the paintings are powerful and have become the largest part of what the public know of Boyd. Many recognise along with the dynamic visual and sensory impact, the presence of dark matter within – but the impression is mostly inchoate and visceral, rather than laden with literal connections to the circumstances and experiences that inspired them.

I imagine that this is exactly what Boyd would have wanted. There has been no suppression, and yet the collective memory of his paintings has separated away from the realities of Boyd's world and the empathetic spirit which drove the creation of so many great and enduring works.

The strength of this exhibition is that it opens up to us that real world, and that authentic context. I thank the Bundanon Trust for curating this

collection, for producing a catalogue, and for allowing it to travel to Canberra, and especially thank all those at the Museum of Australian Democracy who had a hand in attracting it and presenting it here – especially in the context of *The Art of Influence* which is making such an important contribution to The Centenary of Canberra throughout 2013.

In as much as The Centenary has a prime objective of changing perceptions about the National Capital, we have to acknowledge that its primary purpose was to be a seat of Federal Parliament and that political life is at its heart, that many of the policies and High Court decisions which affect our day to day lives, are made right here in Canberra. *The Art of Influence* points to the place where the arts meet politics, and in examining the past, opens our eyes to future possibilities.

This exhibition in particular, celebrates a less well known, or recognised, side of one of our greatest and best-known artists. His works still resonate powerfully with us as pinnacles of twentieth century art-making and originality, but here we have an opportunity to widen our appreciation of the man behind them, and begin to understand many of the clear motives behind those works which generate such a powerful pull towards commenting on the darker side of human behaviour. It too is a perception changer, and one that gives us some very moving insights into an exceptional Australian.

In looking at this exhibition, one can't help but wonder which artists are documenting our times with equal vigour in content and rigour of technique. Richard Bell, perhaps for Indigenous politics, George Gittoes

more overtly in war zones, Susan Norrie about climate change. But when you try to think of Australian artists making work about the most urgent issues of our time, you begin to understand just how extraordinary and how very powerful is the enduring work of Arthur Boyd.

Thankyou

C Robyn Archer, Sydney, Canberra May 2013