ADVANCE AUSTRALIA FAIR

by Pierre Restany

Between April and May 1979 I spent thirty-five days in Australia, visiting a large part of the country and its principal cities. This was a fascinating new experience for me, [redacted] full of surprises. First of all, I was able to clear up some of the prevalent prejudices, clichés and preconceived notions attached to this continent as large as the United States (minus Alaska) and populated by 14 million inhabitants (the population of Holland), with an eighty-five per cent urban concentration.

Australia is a space. Space without limits. (Almost) empty space. (Almost) free space. One cannot understand Australia without this philosophy, this feeling of space. All Australian art and culture is based upon one fundamental apprehension: fear of space, the will to conquer space, and an inferiority or superiority complex vis-à-vis space.

Australia is an Anglo-Saxon country. However it is Anglo-Saxon and not totally protestant, for half the population is of Irish Catholic origin. Everybody knows that Australia was originally populated as a penal colony. This inglorious origin engendered the country's first serious cultural complex. In 1799, that is to say, exactly nineteen years after the foundation of Sydney, the first Australian university was built. The majority of Australia's museums date from the first half

of the nineteenth century.

Australia has tried to make up for the ambiguity of its birth as a nation through cultural investment.

What does one find in these museums founded in the first half of the nineteenth century, which have today become museums of modern art too? The answer is: nineteenth century European landscape painting. The nineteenth century Australian painters, trained in Paris or London and occasionally also in Rome, were competent artists who could paint landscapes of the Roman countryside, an English lake, Brittany or the French Riviera.

But when it came to expressing their own Australian nature, they were seized by a mental blackout. They saw their nature not in its truth, but through the screen of a systematic mystification. Australian nature was nature à la Jean-Jacques Rousseau, a kind of anarchic and romantic garden. This mental barrier remained the principal, stagnant, element of Australian culture not only until the turn of the century but right up till the Second World War. The two world wars were of decisive importance in the evolution of national feeling. The Australian contribution to the colonial and world wars was proportionally massive. Australia was most generous with the blood of its sons; perhaps in a desire to defend the British Empire, but certainly to find its place directly in the global communication circuit of conflict and not to remain ignored

and abandoned on the other side of the earth.

And this is Australia's second complex: its geographic situation at the antipodes, its remoteness from everything. The war provided a means of getting closer to people through the solidarity of arms. In the Australian country even the smallest villages have their war memorials. Beyond the fetishism of memory, these monuments have a quality of communication and solidarity with the rest of the world, an effective bond by now non-existent for the young, but still keenly felt among the middle generation.

The two world wars exerted an important influence on Australia's destiny, creating an essential alteration to the structure of immigration. The ethnic minorities have become increasingly important and aware of their rights. Melbourne is the second largest Greek city in the world. The Italian minorities now have their roots deeply established in the country, and a number of Italo-Australians have risen to prominent positions. The creator and promoter of the Sydney Biennale is of Italian origin, as was the "padre padrone" of the São Paolo Biennale. Other communities (Yugoslav, Lebanese, Turkish) are very active indeed, not to mention the Jews who came after the Second World War and who generally belong to an upper middle social class of freelance professionals, teachers, doctors, lawyers, etc.

With the two world wars the demographic framework changed too.

For more than a century Australia was a land of men where women were few. Women were outnumbered by three to one. This shortage of the female element was responsible for another facet of Australian society: homosexuality, institutionalized through the "mateship system". The mate joins the family and becomes an absolutely trusted figure. This system generates a society of men in a closed circuit among themselves, with no complexes and without the slightest curiosity towards the "other world" of women.

It must have been difficult to be a woman in nineteenth century Australia... Today the proportion of the sexes is almost equal, with a slight preponderance of men. The Australian women are conscious of their rights and very well organized for their defence. For example, at the last Sydney Biennale the association of women artists requested and obtained 50% of the Australian representation.

Australia today is a changing country, and an increasingly cosmopolitan one. It is no longer a penal colony with cultural pretences. It is not the kingdom of men any more. It has grown into a structure of diversified communities. And it is this diversity, in complete contrast with the apparent Anglo-Saxon uniformity, which is the most striking discovery for the visitor.

There is the diversity of life styles. Every big Australian city - Sydney, Melbourne, Adelaide, Brisbane, Darwin, or Perth,

has its peculiar life. Sydney is busy, international and open. Melbourne on the other hand is self-segregated and introvert. Adelaide is indolent, with a semi-Mediterranean climate, the land of wine, spacious gardens and Australian water-melons. Perth is the city of the West, looking out towards the Indian continent.

The social classes, too, have different lifestyles. Homosexuality is uninhibited, without being provocative or overbearing. The Sydney intellectual is different from the Melbourne intellectual. The middle classes in Sydney are more Californian, so to speak, in their way of life, whilst middle classes in Melbourne are much more staid.

All this creates a fragmentation of the way of life, symbolized in the federal capital, Canberra, which is a kind of patchwork, an accumulation of utterly different and unfortunately all Australian mentalities.

Another problem of Australia today is that of the Aborigines.

I went into the centre of the continent, to Alice Springs, to see the Aborigines. Torrential rains left me stranded for three days in this desert town, where I was able to observe and study the autochthones and their condition. It is just like that of the American Indians, neither better nor worse. The bad Australian conscience of the "whites" is the same.

It is easy to be demagogic about this. However, I do believe

that the Australian government is sincerely trying to promote some sort of local élite. Specialized institutes, ethnographers, ethnologists, researchers and anthropologists are trying to bring about a systematic recovery of Aboriginal folklore. This revival is not only anthropological or social but artistic too. And here the matter becomes interesting from a cultural point of view. The Australian landscape painter of the nineteenth century did not see his own nature. Today, the new generation seeks an identity through the objectification of their real country. Among the numerous "painters of space", Fred Williams is the leading figure in a "modern" vision of the vast Australian expanse, seen through a twofold impressionist/abstract expressionist synthesis.

At the same time a movement of environmental artists is developing. They tend to regain elements of Aboriginal folklore as well as of the folklore of the outback, the Australian Far West. The inland part of the country is a land of cattle and sheep, stretching across thousands and thousands of square miles of ranches and cattle stations where the cattle are raised, slaughtered and transported to the big cities.

The jackaroo is the equivalent of the American cowboy. The folklore, however, of the outback is different. It is purely agricultural, associated with a geographical reality, with the cattle station territory, and with a complex technique of breeding based on the division of work and the hierarchy of related pro-

fessions, from that of the trainee up to that of the manager, through the various different specialists, horse-breakers, cattle and sheep guards, leather and wrought iron craftsmen. A wide assortment of technical cultures exists together: those of sheep, cattle, meat, wool and so on. The environmental artists elaborate on the characteristics of this situation.

The other reference point is that of local anthropology. The Australian Aboriginal lives in a world halfway between the real and the unreal, between a dream and reality. He enters into communication with the spirits, in a state of inspired daydreaming, under the sign of an extralucid consciousness. His painting resembles a combination of structural patterns, which are often utilized by the minimal or post-conceptual artists of today.

The environmental artist creates sociological or folklorish types of environment, assemblages of objects of mixed outback and Aboriginal provenance. The results can be surprising, ambiguous, but hardly ever uninteresting. Ken Unsworth, Robert Owen and Marr Grounds seem to be the most interesting figures in this area.

Concerning the pure recovery of Aboriginal folklore, Peter Myers must be mentioned. Myers is an architect and planner who has carried out various missions on behalf of the Australian government into the interior of Arnheim and of the Darwin area.

He has studied fundamental aspects of the construction of houses, tents and huts by the Aboriginals with a view to deriving modular elements from them.

It occurs to me that the environmental artists may perhaps be closer to Australian reality than their nineteenth century ancestors were; and it seems to me that their statements today are of a determinant cultural importance to the quest for an Australian identity.

The other side of the Australian identity is the urban one. The Australian city-dweller has a whole set of urban habits directly inspired by the British way of life, though with one or two modifications. The bar is a basic institution. Known as a "hostel" it would be the equivalent of the pub if it were not for the bedrooms always available on the first floor to accomodate unlawfully drunken customers. Opening times are flexible today and the police are more tolerant. The Australian still drinks heavily and is perhaps one of the world champions at this sport.

The way of living in the city, of drinking, practising certain sports and behaving aggressively has a name in Australian slang: larrikin. The larrikin style can also be found in literature, folklore and popular music. Local rock and pop-songs are very popular and a large number of spontaneous groups exist among the young people, who perform in the "Australian parlours". These boîtes are generally rather modest establish-

ments where one drinks not champagne but beer or the local wine (which is excellent). The atmosphere is frenzied and "hard". The parlours are frequented by young people aged from eighteen to twenty-five. When I arrived there with my beard, I must really have looked very much like an archaic Moses figure.
The larrikin spirit has influenced not only writers, stage designers and artists, but architects too. The Maggy Edmond and Peter Corrigan office is perhaps one of the most significant of a determination to find a place in a specific modern Australian reality. And if I was able to get to know a few aspects of the larrikin lifestyle, I owe it to Corrigan.
Corrigan is of Irish origin and works mostly for the Australian Catholic Church. He has built a number of churches using different local materials - brick, wood and metal. In the neighbourhood of Melbourne, where he lives and works, there is a church dedicated to the Virgin Mary, where Corrigan thought of using sky-blue as a colour to enhance its metal bearing structure. An immediate, almost kitsch, use of architectonic polychromy translates a symbolic message.
One could go on for hours talking about architecture, university education, the relations between the State and the artist, and the promotion of creativity in all fields. But unfortunately one must come to a conclusion. My impression is that this immense country on the other side of the earth will be able in

the near future to offer us another side of art.

Why this optimism? Because Australia is a country full of possibilities, a country with no abusive cultural pretences. Aware of its limits, it is passionately seeking its identity. As Noel Sheridan, director of the Experimental Art Foundation in Adelaide, told me: "We have got to the point at which we can and will do everything in our power. We will do it without complexes, without false modesty and without pride. Just to exist as Australians."

"To exist" in Australian means to live, to live generously, with breadth and a clarity of mind. To sum up, the philosophy I learned from my travels was one of optimism. One can be optimistic on the other side of the earth. I realized this in Australia.

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