

Australian Surrealism Education Pack

Surrealism in Australia

The first modern style to arrive in Australia while it was still alive was Surrealism. It has been said that it was the first international art movement to be understood with any clarity in Australia.

Some European Surrealists imagined Australia to be some kind of surrealist place, partly because of its distance from 'anywhere', its vastness, and its appeal as a 'down under' place where many things appear strange, weird or back the front. But none of the pioneers of Surrealist art visited Australia. Surrealism appealed to young as opposed to established Australian artists. It was seen as an expression of individual freedom, as radical and even anarchic. In the 1930s as war clouds gathered and European nations armed, it was seen as anti-fascist. Surrealism was aligned with left-wing politics, Marxism and sometimes Communism.

During the 1920s and 1930s in Australia there were a few artists, notably Adrian Feint, Sam Atyeo and Adrian Lawlor who experimented with Surrealism. But in the decade from 1938 Surrealism was strongly associated with the formation of contemporary art societies in a number of Australian states. The Surrealist program took a lot of focus and energy from the *Angry Penguins* magazine and group. *Angry Penguins* was founded in Adelaide in 1940 by the literary critic Max Harris, but moved to Melbourne in 1943. The magazine was instrumental in providing an arena for the intense intellectual and political debates occurring at the time. Much of this debate centred on the role of an artist in a modern society. The social realists, a group which included Noel Counihan, Victor O'Connor and Josl Bergner argued that the artist had a responsibility to challenge the state and to serve socio-political objectives.

Other young contemporaries in Melbourne at the time, particularly Sidney Nolan and Albert Tucker asserted the intellectual and imaginative freedom of the artist and his/her independence from political doctrines. Matters came to a head with the 'Anti-Fascist Exhibition' produced by the Contemporary Art Society at the instigation of the Communist members. The Communists were dissatisfied with the response of the *Angry Penguins* group. The break between these two groups was a repeat of division between the French Surrealists and the Communist Party a decade and more earlier in Europe.

The credibility of the *Angry Penguins* suffered a public blow. In 1944 they were the victims of a literary hoax. Max Harris, John Reed and Sidney Nolan published in *Angry Penguins*, poems by the bogus Surrealist poet Ern Malley, which were in fact fabricated by two anti-modernist writers James McAuley and Harold Stewart. When the hoax was revealed and the editors discredited publicly for being taken in the victims of the hoax later claimed that these poems had been designed according to classic Surrealist principles. The Ern Malley poems had been compiled from random assemblage of texts selected from a variety of sources.

After the war the *Angry Penguins* group based in Melbourne broke up. *Angry Penguins* ceased publication in 1946. Tucker having made his mark with his *Images of Modern Evil Series* (1943 – 46) left for Europe in 1947. The *Images* series incorporated classic Surrealist symbolism in the form of the crescent red lips, the limbless torso and the naked eye on the end of a stick. Through such imagery Tucker was able to give expression to his understanding and interest in the subject of human desire and fantasy. Nolan during the war years had been exploring the idea that the Australian landscape could be a site for a new form of mythology. In more recent times this will be regarded as an expression of a felt need to populate or take control of the land at an imaginative or conceptual level. His invention of Ned Kelly as the giant, visored creature striding like a colossus across the landscape was inspired. It drew upon Surrealist modes of working and thinking to create a powerful symbol of alienation and dispossession. Throughout his working life Nolan continued to use Surrealist devices such as floating forms and automatic gesture to invite the viewer to understand experience and history at an intuitive, imaginative level.

Arthur Boyd was involved with *Angry Penguins* and with the inner circle of Tucker, Harris, John and Sunday Reed and Nolan to a lesser extent. His early work was characterised by distorted figures expressing intense emotions. This emotional intensity, often communicated through powerful rhythms, vivid colour and paint textures remained a feature of his life's work.

Surrealism never formulated itself as an 'official' movement in Australia. There was no Surrealist club, society or organization. It just happened in different ways across Australia.

In Adelaide, in July 1942, a band of 'rebel' artists including, Douglas Roberts, David Dallwitz, Jacqueline Hick, Ivor Francis, Jeffrey Smart and Ruth Tuck formed a South Australian associate chapter of the Contemporary Art Society. Their inaugural exhibition of painting supplemented by works by James Gleeson, Carl Plate, Nolan and Tucker shocked elements of conservative Adelaide society. The work of these artists favoured distinctively Surrealist conventions. This group was joined by Dusan Marek in 1948 and James Cant the following year.