

BELINDA FOX – “BACK TO THE START”.

SCOTT LIVESEY GALLERY.

I am honoured to have been asked by Belinda Fox to open this extraordinary exhibition of her new works – *Back to the Start*. I make it clear that I am neither a critic nor author. However, I am an observer of the art world and the extraordinary faculty of young artists within its environs. Belinda is one such talent evidenced by the works surrounding us here this afternoon.

Her works are known to me; indeed Belinda won my Drawing Prize at the Bendigo Gallery in 2010. Roger Butler, Director of Prints and Drawing at the National Gallery of Australia in Canberra was the judge and I thought that his task, back then, was an onerous one as the finalists were all of an extremely high standard with many of considerable stature in the art world. However, as he later informed me, he had no difficulty in selecting Belinda's work, *Monument* as the clear stand out winner. I certainly shared his view. It is worthy of note that this complex and subtle work was recently acquired by the Gold Coast Regional Gallery. It is history now that Belinda is an award winning artist of prodigious talent.

I have thought about this Opening for some time and have come to the view that a short journey through Belinda's background and rationale for her work would be helpful, for this exhibition by its very title alone invites that course. With the process of tertiary education aside, her journey began as a master printer at Port Jackson Press (Australia) collaborating with luminaries including John Olsen, Tim Storrier and the late David Larwill. There followed National and International residency projects and world travel of a Fitzpatrick Travelogue dimension; some 10 selected Solo exhibitions and 20 or so selected Group exhibitions all in the decade 2001 to 2011. I only mention this for it is the visual experience drawn over those years now past that has been fundamental in formulating the basis or philosophy underpinning her work in this exhibition. More specifically however has been the influence of her journey to the arresting and unique Kerala backwaters in India which, as Belinda has explained, currently suffers major stress from environmental issues with an *undertow of corruption, overuse, pollution and risks of extinction* (Artist Statement).

Belinda's work has been described as lyrical abstraction evidencing *the precarious balance in contemporary life between hope and doubt* (Beaver Galleries 2012). This insightful illustration draws accurately upon her

experiences in travel, but more directly to that which Belinda personally observed in Kerala. The actual descriptive nomination itself bears analysis. It has been my experience that the adjective “*lyrical*” has been either misunderstood or taken for granted by many and does warrant plain meaning; namely, the expression of an emotion in an imaginative and beautiful way. So too the common adjective, “*abstract*”, for its everyday meaning (putting aside the volumes of literary commentary) is plain; namely existing in thought or an idea, but not having a physical or concrete existence. As simplistic as this may be to art critics and academics, it is nonetheless important because that ascribed narrative, in my view, strikes at the very epicentre of Belinda’s work.

It is by resort to plain English that one can understand the precision and meaning of *lyrical abstraction* and its direct application to her work. Furthermore, it is from this quite unsophisticated, yet central theme that one can pinpoint the essential thrust in the development of her work and that which we are privileged to see this afternoon. In 2010, Trent Walter, when discussing Belinda’s exhibition, *Day to Day* described her art as being *rich in its materiality, with the delicately rendered and layered works and with images of conflict and tranquillity revealing a broader discourse of fragmentation in our contemporary society*. He perceptively and eloquently discussed the *spiritual element* to her paintings that identified with an *ideology for responding to conflict in our daily lives*.

When one carefully considers the entirety of the works in this imposing exhibition, I can’t help but again call to mind the earlier descriptive analysis of Trent Walter when he wrote of their *seductive beauty that encourages pause and reflection*. Indeed, these are works that offer a *better world* – they offer hope. As I see it however, that imperative has been integrally linked to Belinda’s life’s journey, having personally observed an Arcadian environment, its degradation and through artistic, spiritual force proclaim hope, expectation and optimism.

In 2011, Glenn Barkley, curator at the Museum of Contemporary Art in a complex essay drew the important connection between Belinda’s work as a printmaker and her works on board, observing that this *interest in process, in discovering new things, in following a hunch, lies at the centre of (her) practice*.

The significance that the medium of travel has played in the development of Belinda’s work is obvious. Through this, she has experienced the powerful, defining forces and contradictions that permeate contemporary life and are transposed into her works. In an article featured in *Daily Imprint* (27 August

2012), Belinda described her most inspirational factor as *humanity – for all its grandeur and incredible failures*. That, in my view encapsulates the thematic complexity of her work.

It is beyond argument that her abiding interest in process and the memory surface of past events chronicled through travel has been the central force to this current exhibition, as it has been now for some time. So much so is evident by what she said in 2009, namely a *period of conceptual and technical inquiry, a meditation on past histories and future possibilities* (*Finding My Way* – Turner Galleries, Perth WA).

In a recent interview, Belinda spoke of her journey to the backwaters of Kerala and her work, the subject of this exhibition which, she said, *usually emerges through a creative process of filtering images and experiences*, explaining her interest in *dualities: hope and doubt; positive and negative; the amazing things humanity is capable of and the awful deeds we sometimes do* (*In the Studio with Belinda Fox*; Art & Leisure, May 2013). Central to her theme is the polarisation between the beauty, majesty and spirituality of the environment itself and the potential peril of its demise through Government indifference. Embedded in the works are metaphors of hope, so strikingly symbolized through the lotus flower, explained by Belinda as *abstract mirrored gateways* (Art & Leisure – supra). Perhaps, too, a manifestation of a personal journey into uncharted future territories?

Given Belinda's unique background and the philosophical imperatives that drive her work, it is clear that this exhibition culminates several fundamental factors. The most obvious to me are; firstly, it is an intense pictorial recourse to a memory surface and bank of visual experiences etched into her individual persona; secondly, it is a journey through an ancient, mysterious landscape of deep spiritual beauty; thirdly, with that said, it is only upon a measured consideration of the intensity and interplay of the overall meticulously considered imagery that one understands the threat of environmental issues integrated within several of the works. For example, a collision between ancient classic traditions and the demands of the 21st Century, none the least of which is global tourism and the many forces pushing economic progress. Are these old traditions under threat? Is this unique landscape balancing on the precipice of change? Fourthly, the works overall present a personal cognitive abstract and the formidable capability of human indifference seen through the Kerala backwaters.

Through all this however, Belinda expresses both hope and conviction evidenced within the overall imagery. Her focus upon icons as a representative symbol, such as the lotus and magnolia flowers, is even more

abstracted as a form than earlier exhibitions. As she explained “*they form gateways and are like objects taken, grown, created from within the landscape. They have been morphed and evolved from the essence of the land*” (Personal communication – 30 July 2013)

This is an exhibition of works in which Belinda reveals the painterly mastery of her art.

Upon careful consideration of each work, you cannot help but be engaged by the technical intricacy and intuitive application underscored from the memory bank of Belinda’s journey. The essential image of each work reveals a story. Perhaps, a world where you are left to your own imagination? Each of them requires close scrutiny in order to absorb the subdued variations, the colour field and the interplay of placement, object, brush marking, drips, washes, stains, layering and fine line work. Each board has been developed, sanded back and layered with constant erasure redefining the overall impact to completion of what may be perceived as a scene, but is that much more, for in essence it amounts to an abstracted experience of social conscience.

The synergy or interaction between the images in each work generates a combined effect of deep spiritual meaning greater by far than their component parts. The link to each of them however is the mystery to be unravelled within the individual sensibilities of the viewer. That may only be achieved against the background prescribed by Belinda, the subliminal stimulus that drove each work and understanding that which moved the humanitarian and conflicting global issues that underscore this exhibition. In her interview (Art & Leisure – supra) Belinda spoke of her interest in dualities and in particular referred to that of *hope and doubt*. Given the title to the exhibition, I am reminded of the words of Josiah Royce, an influential American objective idealist and philosopher, who wrote – *Memory and hope constantly incite us to the extensions of the self which play so large a part in our daily life.*

Perhaps a long shot on my part, but maybe this is what Belinda was talking about in that interview when she later said – *I guess I am thinking a lot about entering new territories and unknown futures.*

The Honourable Paul M Guest OAM QC
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