

Celia Perceval
"An Expression of Interest"
By Dr Garry Darby

Celia Perceval's paintings aim to evoke an 'experience' of the bush. Clearly she does not set out to paint 'photographic' images of exactly what she sees. Rather, the dashes and streaks of luscious, impasto paint coalesce into a mood-evoking image which invites comparison with our own, individual perceptions.

Our eyesight can act as a screen for the many other truths of nature. One of these is an abstracted sense, feeling or memory, difficult to put into words or images, that we have all felt in places such as forests, snowfields, deserts or the non-descript bush populated by native gums. Consequently, Celia aims to go beyond the image, colours and forms which present themselves so readily. A Perceval landscape can transport us to a level beyond mere looking.

There is a distinct difference between looking and seeing and it is this phenomenon which tends to set the successful landscape painters apart. In this regard, in Australia, one can point to Fred Williams, Russell Drysdale, Arthur Boyd, John Olsen, or much earlier the colonial master, John Glover. Their landscape paintings are individual responses which come from much more than a mere reporting of a thing seen. They invite us to empathise with their individual experiences of the bush. Indeed Fred Williams claimed that he made, 'pictures *from* the bush rather than pictures *of* the bush'. Arthur Boyd, with seemingly effortless ease, was able to bring to mind the sulky mood of the Shoalhaven River near Bundanon.

Just as John Olsen has evoked the graphic and poetic qualities of the creatures in and around Lake Eyre, Celia isolates, and dashes down, the playful flight (or indeed the sound) of a bird as it darts about the rustling bush of Eden. Its movement alone is one subject of her dancing, mobile canvasses. This combined notion of movement, sound and colour promotes a sense of abstraction which is always just below the surface, but nevertheless paramount in her work. Intriguingly the sets of images, interlaced as they are with slashed-on strokes of paint, remain easily read through their forms, light and colour in any conventional sense. We are with her, in an intimate moment and space, surrounded by bushland.

She is a painter whose works may profitably be inspected from very close range. Up close one sees the 'history' of the work, the way that it was made. This is the artist's view. After all, most paintings are made at arms length and therefore it is proper to move in close and get the feel of the paint, see the dragging course of the brush as it applies texture and cuts a path through other paint, watch the way paint behaves, and just for a moment witness the thrill of creation. Naturally one should then step back, just as the artist would have done in the process, and take in the overall effect. Claude Monet's paintings (especially the waterlilies) may be experienced in exactly the same

way, and the great painter, at Giverny, frequently spoke of the 'effects' he sought in his work.

In a recent interview, Celia intimated that she would like to see her work progress more and more towards a non-objective, abstract state. This came as somewhat of a surprise because after all, she is the product of a significant line of figurative painters, all of whom have eschewed abstraction. Perhaps her patrons and supporters would be disappointed, to a greater or lesser degree, to see the eucalypt, native birds, creeks and mountains disappear from her work. They would, however, remain in essence and spirit.

Indeed, the admired qualities in her work certainly include the expressive use of brushwork, exaggerated colour and the rapidity and scattered nature of her paint application. In nurturing such techniques, Celia has already gone down the path towards abstraction. She acknowledges this unequivocally and when further changes occur in her work they will continue on that path. She has, of course, long ago, mastered the formal qualities of painting and will seek to expand on these in a way which will alter and elevate her status amongst contemporary Australian painters.

Celia Perceval's paintings are the result of a series of abiding influences that have worked on her consciousness since her pre-teen years. Like her uncle, Arthur Boyd, Celia says she never made a conscious decision to become a painter. Isn't that what everybody did ...?, paint, sculpt, pot or write everyday. Her earliest mentors included members of Melbourne's famous "Angry Penguins" group, Sidney Nolan, Arthur Boyd, Albert Tucker and, of course, her father, John Perceval. Discussing those artists with her produces a joyous informality as she refers to 'Dad', 'Sid', or 'Mum' (John Perceval, Sidney Nolan, Mary Boyd)

Of those it remains her father who casts the giant shadow, She announces matter-of-factly, "He was a genius", and in the next breath, "he was a very handsome man, attractive to almost everyone he met'. Clearly, John Perceval's painting style became firmly embedded in his daughter's mind (Celia had her first solo exhibition at the age of sixteen). Any examination of her painting style must embrace the inventiveness and memorable notions of her father's work.

Should we take one further step back in time to examine influences working on John Perceval we would inevitably arrive at the work of Vincent van Gogh. Early on John made detailed copies of some of van Gogh's paintings and, without ever stating it, was directed towards the style, aims and techniques of expressionism. In this he was not alone, for painters of the caliber of Matisse, Derain and Vlaminck (the Fauves) also gained strength and inspiration from Vincent's work.

As a teenage girl in London, Celia was taken, with her siblings, to the great galleries. From reflection on these times she vividly recalls seeing works by the Dutch master who so energetically expressed his emotion, angst, loves and hates with thick, swirling paint

on canvas. She unequivocally nominates van Gogh as a major influence and when asked to use one word to describe her own style nominates 'expressionist'.

Expressionists set out to let the world know about their feelings. Celia talks about wanting to bring a complete experience to life. She paints rapidly (a time-honored part of the expressionist technique). This rapidity, however, comes at a price. The price is an exhausting flurry of marks and actions which may go on for hours at a stretch as the image takes shape. Exhausting because each mark on the canvas demands a decision, an intellectual process which, in both the short and long term, affects the very outcome and therefore the success of the work at hand. The acts of looking, seeing, evaluating, interpreting, digesting and reproducing any one individual mark may take just a fraction of a second. A day's painting for Celia may involve many millions of such decisions (marks).

For her, one imagines, it would be a blessing if the marks did not have to represent forms from the concrete world. It would seem that if she could divest herself of that limitation her works would sing with colour, texture and line in a way which would set her free. She could move beyond the limitation imposed by her sense of sight.

A major well-spring of inspiration for many painters, Celia included, is music, and without saying it specifically, Celia alludes to the claim that, 'all art aspires to the quality of music'. That is, it should be lyrical and free in a way that is thrilling in its non-objective state. Music, as we all know, can induce a state of mind, and as such may readily be compared with the aims of the painter, particularly the expressionist painter. Celia has catholic taste in music but always seeks what she describes as a 'legitimate' form.

Her paintings then are the result of a series of factors she has absorbed throughout a journey which began more than thirty-five years ago. As the current Western Australia exhibition demonstrates she is willing to grapple with new problems so as to invigorate her art. Conveying the movement, dash and colour of the bush are her major objectives here. He offers us the wonderful possibility of seeing all that through her eyes, the very experienced eyes of a 'professional looker'.

By engaging with these works we may be rewarded and led away from the mundane into what Marcus Clarke described as 'the weird melancholy of the Australian bush'. Celia's bushland, be it in isolated parts of Western Australia or near her home on the far south coast of New South Wales, is never still, never silent and always vibrant with colour.

Dr Garry Darby