[REVIEW ESSAY]

PORTRAIT OF THE ART HISTORIAN AS A YOUNG MAN

Peter Beilharz sees more than just a memoir in Bernard Smith's new volume of autobiography

BERNARD Smith and Robert Hughes have dominated Australian art history and criticism for a long time. No wonder they have their enemies. I have met Robert Hughes only once, at the launch of American Visions (1997) at Readings bookstore in Carlton. I told him I thought it was a great book, and an especially good television series. I gave him a copy of my book on Bernard Smith, Imagining the Antipodes, published in the same year. In his gruff but amicable manner, he said to me, 'You must have known Bernard for a long time.' I replied that I hadn't; we

had opened a relationship in 1993, when I'd approached Bernard with the idea of a book on his work.

I think I can now claim a special relationship with Bernard Smith. Perhaps it is an intersection, more than a matter of lives along parallel paths. I came to Smith not only late but also across other fields. I had the advantage, I think, of not being an art critic, neither his student nor his competitor or opponent. I have, of course, come upon many who claim to know him and his work better than I do. I was unaware, on beginning, that there were others who had special claims to authority on Smith, which they had, however, never acted upon. As the nastier reviews of Imagining the Antipodes appeared, it became more apparent to me that I was a poacher among others who had purchased licences but failed to exercise them. Others always know better.

We are still learning about Bernard Smith. We will learn a great deal more when Patricia Anderson's biography is published, and when others turn to the work of detailed research and interpretation that will confirm my book as what it claims to be, a first book about Bernard Smith. Meanwhile, he is also still writing. In A Pavane for Another Time he tells more of his ‘establishment’ phase in the 1940s than we have readily known before. He has painstakingly revisited his own papers, those that I also worked through over three years of Fridays at his home in Fitzroy, where from time to time I came upon things I thought too personal or private to warrant discussion in my book. My concern was with his ideas. Perhaps, indeed, he tells us more than we need to know, at least about sex. In A Pavane for Another Time we meet another Bernard Smith, the boy from the bush who goes to London, to the Courtauld Institute. This book is a sequel to The Boy Adeodatus (1984), but it is a very different kind of book. Twenty years after Adeodatus, Smith's style is less given to choreography, more documentary and ruminative in form. It befits Smith's present moment in life. This is an important book, and we are fortunate to have it. It maintains the historian's discretion of Adeodatus in sticking well clear of the present. This is consistent with Smith's lifelong sympathy with Hegel. Smith has always been fond of Hegel's Owl of Minerva—with the idea that wisdom arrives at the end of the day (or else, just too late).

The central chronological frame for Pavane is the 1940s, particularly the years he spent away on the Continent and in England, in the crucible of Western art collections and their scholarship. This was not only his journey out. It was a confirmation of how European his formation had already been. Smith's Sydney, into the days of the Second World War, was already European. The people with whom he mixed, in and around the Communist Party, were often escapees from
the crises on the other side. Spain, Germany and Poland and the Soviet Union 
were perpetually present, politically and culturally in the Sydney of his day. 
Smith's first great work on Australian painting, Place, Taste and Tradition (1945), 
was in this context an accident; while everybody else in the Teachers' Branch of 
the Communist Party was tied to Europe and its art or politics, Smith alone rose 
to the challenge of filling the antipodean gap. He began by giving lectures on 
Australian art. The gesture was vital, but, as he notes in opening Pavane, the price 
of this achievement has been considerable. He has been corralled as 'Australian', 
with the result that his most significant recent book, Modernism's History (1998), 
has fallen down the back of the metropolitan fridge.

Several Australian reviewers of Modernism's History imagined Smith to be 
poaching. By what right, with what authority, could he claim to speak now, at the 
end of his career, about international art? The book suffered a similar predic­
ament in its metropolitan reception. It arrived at the same time as several other 
obituaries for modernism. Why value the view of an outsider over or against those 
of the cosmo specialists at the centres? How, in the eyes of the transatlantic art 
mafia, could an outsider like Smith have the authority to speak on world art? How 
could an Australian—or one who had not, like Robert Hughes, long expatriated 
himself—be expected to know anything about the centres? The contempt of 
silence that greeted Modernism's History reflects the older, imperial sensibility for 
which the Antipodes is a place ineluctably down under rather than one of 
dynamic interchange and complex relationships between peripheries and centres 
constructed through cultural traffic. The irony is that Smith and his mates in the 
forties knew more about European art than about Australian art. He spent years 
teaching about metropolitan art on his return, not least at the University of 
Melbourne. His lectures on the subject, full of powerful insights, are also there 
among his papers in Fitzroy.

What he did while at the Courtauld Institute in one sense represented a step 
back from Place, Taste and Tradition. His interest now was in the earliest European 
ideas about the Southern Hemisphere. As he wrote in a letter to Lindsay Gordon 
on 23 November 1949, 'I am becoming convinced that the conception of Paradise, 
Utopia and "working man's Paradise" in the Southern Land is one of the central 
historical ideas running through Australian literature, art and politics.' The 
antipodean optic was opened, a decade before The Antipodean Manifesto in 1959 
or European Vision and the South Pacific in 1960. The whole point about Europe 
and its antipodes was obvious: the two were inseparable. To learn about one was 
simultaneously to puzzle over the other.
That Smith became known as an authority on Australia was against his intention. I think this is one reason he has played down his achievement as a Cook scholar; he does not want to be viewed as an Australianist. The great achievement of *European Vision and the South Pacific* was precisely to insist on the inextricable nature of those series of places and ideas. Australian art could never be self-sufficient, any more than French or English art could be. Cultural innovation and movement results rather from traffic in people and ideas. *European Vision and the South Pacific* was ahead of its time in paying attention to this traffic. In the nuance of its argument about European perception and the experience of the voyagers, that book is closer to our times, to the revived interest in so-called primitivism, the ‘noble savage’ and the representation of the other. It is both an anticipation and a precursive qualification of Edward Said’s rather one-dimensional analysis of so-called Orientalism. Smith would insist that the processes whereby Western sensibilities replenish their jaded appetites for the exotic with japonisme, chinoiserie, and romanticisms of other contrived provenance, are part of a much larger, more complicated, and ongoing series of transactions between the various cultures concerned. His own focus (or one such) is on the Pacific as an intellectual laboratory of empirical experiment. The experiences of Cook and Banks and their painters affected indigenous peoples, but plainly also had an impact upon the centres of Enlightenment. It was (partly at least) with New South Wales in mind that Bentham envisaged his panopticon—which in turn, as it happens, provided a springboard for and provocation for Foucault’s insights in our own day.

Smith’s personal discovery of the European ‘other’ ended on 1 January 1951, when the *Otranto* docked back in Sydney. His East European encounters had put an end to his residual commitment to the Communist Party. Smith told Sam Lewis, head of the Teachers’ Branch of the party, that he would rather live in Australia under Menzies than in Czechoslovakia under Gottwald. The rest of his formal career was yet to begin: teaching at Melbourne University from 1956, establishing the Power Institute at Sydney University in 1960, retiring back to Melbourne to write—and paint.

After *European Vision* there came *Australian Painting*. Those who grew up with or alongside Bernard Smith did not have my advantage as a come-lately, to read the collected works sequentially, as one would Marx or Gramsci. Those who read the books on Australian painting seem often to have imagined either that Smith viewed Australian art as derivative of European art, or else, after the publication of the *Antipodean Manifesto*, as a plea for cultural nationalism. But his views have
never been as narrow or simple or categorical or mutually exclusive. Read contextually and serially, Smith's work suggests, rather, that it is as impossible to speak of European artistic traditions without antipodean art as it is the other way around.

If Smith's fate has been to be placed as an Australianist, the great significance of *A Pavane for Another Time* is to act as a corrective to this view. Indeed, it is difficult not to believe that, after a career both of recognition as well as misrecognition, Bernard Smith is engaging here in a resolute attempt to fashion, or at least inform anew, the subsequent reception of his earlier work.

The prompt here has been the veil of silence drawn over his global study of modern art, *Modernism's History*. Smith still insists on being heard, even as antipodeans remain sidelined, stuck in the sideshows of global culture. We should be thankful that he returned to Australia, has stayed and has continued always to write. While in one sense *A Pavane for Another Time* might be read as memoir, a time slice and a further work of acknowledgement and confession to his first wife, Kate, in terms of the reception of his ideas it might also be seen as an attempt to put Hegel to the test. It's a gift from the Owl of Minerva.