

A horse designed by a committee: Revisiting the Tate's 1963 survey of Australian painting

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[back](#)

The major survey of Australian art that opened at the Tate Gallery in January 1963 is often compared unfavourably with 'Recent Australian Painting', Bryan Robertson's curation of contemporary painting held at the Whitechapel Gallery some eighteen months earlier. 'Australian Painting: Colonial, Impressionist, Contemporary' was openly criticised in the press following its preview showing at the Adelaide Festival of Arts in 1962 and these criticisms surfaced again in some of the reviews of the Tate show that appeared in the London papers. The exhibition has become more famous for the controversy surrounding it than for being, as it undoubtedly was, the biggest historical survey of Australian painting to be held in London since 1923. In a vociferous letter to the Sydney Morning Herald, Albert Tucker condemned the under-representation of contemporary works, accusing the Commonwealth Art Advisory Board (CAAB) of perpetrating 'a shocking deception on the state gallery directors, the Tate Gallery Trustees, Australian artists and the Australian public.'

The timing of the Tate show was certainly unfortunate. 'Recent Australian Painting', after all, had been originally conceived as a complementary exhibition to run alongside its Tate counterpart. But while Robertson was able to launch the Whitechapel show in June 1961, the Tate show was delayed for a further year and a half. Inevitably then, its contemporary section became to some extent a repeat performance, albeit an enlarged and embellished one. But the 'shocking deception' that Tucker claimed was perpetrated by the CAAB in selecting 'Australian Painting', backed up by criticism from Eric Westbrook, director of the National Gallery of Victoria (NGV) and others, has distorted the true picture of how the exhibition was originally conceived, developed and eventually presented to the Australian and British public ...

'Australian Painting: Colonial, Impressionist, Contemporary' opened at AGSA on 17 March 1962 with a speech given by Prime Minister Menzies. Initial reactions to the exhibition were mixed, but gradually a wave of criticism grew, fuelled by publicity in the

Australian press. The Sun Herald reported that contemporary painters wanted the exhibition withdrawn and completely reconstructed. Tucker, who was at the forefront of this campaign, claimed that the Tate had expected to get an exhibition that was predominately contemporary and which had been chosen by directors of the state galleries. 'In fact', he added, 'the directors had not been allowed any say in the selection and the Art Advisory Board had assembled a collection which was more than half historical.' 'Taste in this country', he went on, 'is being dictated by a group of men whose ideas have never progressed beyond the nineteenth century and who are subject to the artistic prejudices of the Prime Minister.'...

Since the preview exhibition was now on show in Adelaide and the board's selection was open to public scrutiny, arguably it was a case of shutting the stable door after the horse had already bolted - a horse, designed by committee, that fully pleased nobody and had come to resemble a camel. Late in the day, a number of changes were made on the advice of the state gallery directors who had been invited to attend the preview opening. Fred Williams, absent both from the CAAB's final selection and the Adelaide preview, was subsequently represented by two paintings in the Tate exhibition, as was Frances Smith, a young Sydney painter favoured by Missingham. Additional representation by Jean Bellette, Ray Crooke, Donald Friend, Leonard Hessing, Justin O'Brien, Stanislaus Rapotec, William Rose, Jeffrey Smart and Tom Thompson meant that the Tate exhibition underwent a significant revision before it was finally shipped off to England.

Following the London opening, the Sunday Times's art critic John Russell wrote that the show had been 'roughly handled by avant-garde opinion when it was walked round the paddock in Australia, and it has since been modified by the inclusion of a number of important works by younger artists.' The Times reported 'allegations that the selection was unrepresentative and too much a reflection of "official taste";', adding: 'but now that the exhibition is finally installed at the Tate it looks rather better than the more woeful prophets had predicted.' Terence Mullaly, in a review for the Daily Telegraph, challenged the selection whilst T. G. Rosenthal, writing for The Listener, found it 'hard to see who but the imposingly titled Commonwealth Art Advisory Board will be pleased by this selection' ...

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