



Peter Booth: human/nature

FROM ABSTRACTION THROUGH FIGURATION AND LANDSCAPE, JOHN MCPHEE
TRACKS THE WORK OF PRE-EMINENT AUSTRALIAN ARTIST PETER BOOTH.



Most people first saw Peter Booth's work in 1968 when one of his large minimalist geometric abstractions was included in *The Field*. Celebrating the opening of the new National Gallery of Victoria (NGV) in St Kilda Road, Melbourne, the exhibition was the most significant survey of contemporary Australian art ever mounted. Concentrating on the work of young and emerging artists, the exhibition included the work of 40 artists. Among them were the painters Gunter Christmann, Janet Dawson, Dale Hickey, Robert Hunter, Mel Ramsden, Robert Rooney, Dick Watkins and sculptors Ian Burn, Tony Coleing, and Clement Meadmore. These were the artists most influenced by the art shown in *Two Decades of American Painting* when the largest exhibition of 20th century American art was shown in Melbourne and Sydney in 1967. They represented those Australian artists who had turned away from figurative art to the 20th century trends we associate with American abstraction – colourfield, hard-edge minimalism and op art in particular.

In 1968 Peter Booth's contribution to the exhibition was a typical example of his work and looked like geometric minimalism. It might even have been considered hard-edge. However, looking at these paintings in retrospect, we see that their hand-painted edges are not hard and that their surfaces are far from the carefully applied, gesture-free paint of minimalism. They did, in fact, possess many of the qualities of painterliness and expressionism that were to emerge in his work a few years later.



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The so-called doorway paintings, painted in the early 1970s, consisted of large black rectangles with a thin border of colour on both sides and across the top, thereby creating the 'doorway' image. The most significant of these is that acquired for the NGV in 1971. The dull pink edges, occasionally splashed with black, contrast with the seemingly even blackness of the doorway. Closer and more careful observation of these canvases reveals the lengths to which the artist has gone to create a richly textured, albeit subtle, surface, that is far removed from the flat and mechanical paint of minimalism. The surfaces of the paintings that followed were even more textured. In his large gestural works the predominant black began to be challenged by reds, oranges and yellows in thick paint that occasionally included silver paint and pieces of broken mirror and razor blades.

At the same time Peter Booth began to paint a few small landscapes. These more obviously drew on the imagery of his drawing which had significantly almost always been representational.

In 1977 Peter Booth first exhibited large figurative paintings. These thickly painted works depicted scenes of apparent devastation populated by figures aimlessly wandering around and sometimes accompanied by animals, in particular a manifestation of his beloved bull terriers. By the early 1980s these landscapes had become crowded with people, many mutants and mythological creatures, including antipodeans and cyclops. They were frequently being attacked by beasts and there was often evidence of, or allusions to, horrific events that had or were about to take place. In later works groups of men stood around, as if wanting something to happen or watching a fight. The sense of menace and frustration in these paintings, and a few small bronze sculptures, is great.

Later in the 1980s new, less menacing, but no less bleak, landscapes appeared. Dark, cold, seascapes with endless waves and no sign of land, or rocky shores pounded by an unforgiving surf, empty wintry forest scenes and desolate cityscapes featuring ruined and burning buildings, sometimes just a few bricks, to indicate the past presence of man, are common. Snow

This page: Peter Booth, *Winter*, 1993. Oil on Canvas, 280 x 305cm. COURTESY: NATIONAL GALLERY OF VICTORIA.

Opposite page top: Peter Booth, *Untitled*, 1971. Polymer paint on canvas. 245 x 184.5cm. COURTESY: NATIONAL GALLERY OF VICTORIA.

Bottom: Peter Booth, *Painting*, 1977. Oil on Canvas, 182.5 x 304cm. COURTESY: NATIONAL GALLERY OF VICTORIA.

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frequently falls or blankets these landscapes, sometimes a phosphorescent sun sinks, or rises, and a portentous comet falls to earth. These are landscapes full of bleak symbolism. Undoubtedly apt for the belligerent beginning of the 21st century.

Biography

Peter Booth was born in the gloomy industrial city of Sheffield, England, in 1940. The darkened skies and smoking chimneys of his work, in particular the drawings, of the 1970s, are said to be images drawn from his memories of his childhood. As a teenager he attended drawing classes at the Sheffield College of Art in 1956 and 1957, before emigrating with his family to Australia in 1958 where he worked at various labouring jobs.

From 1962 to 1965 Peter Booth studied painting full-time at the National Gallery Art School, Melbourne, where in 1964 he was awarded the prize for subject painting and was joint winner of the Bernard Hall prize for figure painting. In 1966 he commenced teaching painting full-time at Prahran Technical College Art and in the following year returned to the Gallery Art School to teach evening drawing classes.

In 1969 Peter Booth stopped teaching to return to a labouring job and then worked as a technical assistant at the NGV until 1975. He taught again in 1975 and 1976 and was senior lecturer in painting at the Victorian College for the Arts from 1983 to 1986, when he returned to painting full-time. He lives and paints full-time in the bayside Melbourne suburb of St Kilda.

Exhibitions and publications

Peter Booth first exhibited drawings in a group exhibition at Strines Gallery, Melbourne, in 1967. Following his inclusion in *The Field* he held solo exhibitions in 1969 in Melbourne at Bruce Pollard's Pinacotheca and in Sydney at the Central Street Gallery. His friendship with Pollard and the other artists exhibiting at Pinacotheca ensured that he continued to exhibit there throughout the 1970s and into the 1980s. Currently he exhibits with Anna Schwartz Gallery, Melbourne, and Rex Irwin, Sydney.

In 1976 the Art Gallery of New South Wales (AGNSW) made Peter Booth's work the subject of its *Project 12* exhibition. Curated by Frances Lindsay the exhibition pamphlet is hard to come by. Her later article about the artist in *Art and Australia*, volume 16 number 1 in September 1978, remains the best account of Peter Booth and offers insightful observations of his work. The other significant solo museum exhibition *Peter Booth: Works on Paper 1963-1985*, also curated by Frances Lindsay, was shown at the University Gallery, University of Melbourne, in 1985. The catalogue for this exhibition documents the importance of drawing throughout the artist's career.

In 1982 in the Australian exhibit at the Venice Biennale, Peter Booth's work was exhibited alongside that of Rosalie Gascoigne. Perhaps the strangest and most inappropriate pairing of artist's ever conceived by Australian art bureaucracy, the catalogue essay by Gary Catalano offers another good assessment of his work.

Peter Booth's work has been included in numerous art museum survey exhibitions, most notably Ron Radford's *Recent Australian Painting: A Survey 1970-1983*, at the Art Gallery of South



Australia (AGSA) in 1983.

Curiously, and perhaps because of the artist's reluctance to allow his painting to be interrupted by the necessary interviews and probing into the past, his work has never been the subject of a book or major art museum retrospective. This will change when the NGV's retrospective opens in late November 2003.

The best works and where to find them

Peter Booth's painting is represented in most major Australian art museums. The NGV has excellent representation of his painting since the late 1960s. The AGNSW, the AGSA and the National Gallery of Australia (NGA), all have significant examples of Peter Booth's painting, and representative collections of his works on paper. Several secondary market dealers stock his work from time to time and they occasionally appear at auction.

Prices at auction

Prices for paintings by Peter Booth have in his most recent exhibitions ranged from \$15,000 to \$60,000.

At auction over the past decade the Australian Art Sales Digest (www.aasds.com.au) records the average price of paintings sold at auction each year as having increased from \$10,000 in 1993 to \$70,000 in 2002. Drawings have increased in average price from about \$2,000 in 1993 to nearly \$4,000 in 2002.

The highest price for a painting sold at auction was \$176,250 for *Painting*, 1981, depicting a devil and a laughing man (Christies, Melbourne, 25 June 2002, lot 78). The significance of this work, which had been exhibited in Australia and overseas, and the fact that it was undoubtedly the best of Peter Booth's figurative paintings to be sold at auction, account for this impressive price. Less well known, and smaller, paintings have sold for prices of about \$35,000 to \$50,000.

A variety of works on paper, including watercolours, pastels and pen and ink drawings, have sold at auction for prices ranging from as low as \$121 for a scrap 6.75 x 7.0 cm (Bruce's Auctions, Adelaide, 11 March 2002, lot 102) to about \$8,000.

Advice to the collector

As a committed modernist Peter Booth has never given titles to his paintings. They are all either described as painting or untitled. In an attempt to differentiate works dealers and curators have frequently assigned descriptive titles.

Peter Booth's paintings have never been cheap, but then they have always been good. Even at auction, where there are sometimes bargains in contemporary art, the best works have sold well. Be prepared to spend up big and buy a work that will challenge you for years to come. If you can not afford a painting buy a drawing, perhaps even aim to develop a collection of drawings. The more adventurous should buy a sculpture. After all, it undoubtedly will be worth it.

Peter Booth – Human/Nature is at the National Gallery of Victoria from 29 November 2003 to 8 February 2004. ■



This page above left: Peter Booth, *Painting two*, 1984. Oil on canvas, 198 x 305cm. COURTESY: NATIONAL GALLERY OF VICTORIA.

Above: Peter Booth, *Painting*, 1988. Oil on canvas, 167 x 112cm. Collection of the artist. COURTESY: NATIONAL GALLERY OF VICTORIA.

Opposite page: Peter Booth, *Two Figures*, 1987. Oil on canvas, 182 x 305cm. COURTESY: NATIONAL GALLERY OF VICTORIA.