



Bromley in Alice

CHRIS RAJA

Beautiful Country in March), and to hear of those they intend to put some polish to: in particular, a retrospective showing of works by deceased Alice Springs arts pioneer Halcyon Lucas who left behind a legacy of works spanning four decades (8 to 29 May 2009).

The gallery has set the benchmark high, and one wonders whether the Bromley exhibition can be matched by future shows. Bromley, after all, is a five-time finalist in the Archibald Prize and widely considered one of Australia's most collectable artists. His paintings shine with a similar radiance to those of New York Pop artists Andy Warhol and Roy Lichtenstein, both of whom lifted images from commercial art and popular culture and infused them with their own personal slant. Likewise, Bromley uses imagery appropriated from the 'Boy's own adventure' genre of paperbacks popular in the 1950s, thus eliciting a nostalgic yet somewhat unsettling memory of a time when childhood was somehow more innocent and full of promise. The vulnerability and optimism expressed in the fourteen such 'portraits' on display seemed to strike a deep, forgotten chord within.

Bromley's other chief concern is nudes. Beguiling women, painted larger than life from the midriff, on backgrounds of gold or silver metallic leaf. These are astonishing representations of his favourite models who he has painted from life, time and time again. *Belinda* (2000) wears the thick stripes of poured acrylic paint across her face and body; her gaze directed confidently outward; *Melinda* (2000) is more demure with her golden hair and sparkling blue eyes taking the fore against a bright red canvas. *Romy* (2000) is the only nude in the group with eyes downcast, a picture of serenity and maternal beauty, while *Femme Rouge* (who apparently wished to remain anonymous) burns with the red and orange energy only found in fire, defying the viewer to stand in front of her to

I FELT AS THOUGH I'D WALKED THROUGH THE COVER of a comic book. On one page a squirrel piloting an aeroplane; on another page, a boy playing dress-ups in cowboy gear; and on yet another, a pouting blue temptress, naked from the waist up. These pages have leapt to life and the effect is absorbing – and more than a little extraordinary. Yet this is no comic book; this is Peta Appleyard Gallery in Todd Mall, Alice Springs with their recent February/ March exhibition, *An eclectic exhibition of recent works by David Bromley*, a thoroughly high-energy affair that drew me back several times.

Peta Appleyard Gallery is a new, sophisticated gallery in the centre of Australia professing an 'enduring dedication to the promotion of collectable Australian and Indigenous Australian art'. What is being achieved here is nothing short of bold and hopefully heralds a turning point in the retail dominated Alice Springs art scene. This is an exhibiting gallery that promises a balanced representation of the wellspring of talent in the Centre by alternating shows of Indigenous and non-Indigenous artists. As a fledgling business, its exhibition calendar for the year has some spaces yet to be filled but it is exciting to witness the many gems that they have unearthed (such as the preview show of limited edition etchings from Utopia, *Apmer Mwerrangker*:





OPPOSITE, TOP: David Bromley, *Man's best friend*, 1999, acrylic on linen, 101 x 101cm; BOTTOM: David Bromley, *Untitled*, 2000, acrylic on calico drop sheet, 139 x 345cm. ABOVE: David Bromley, *Jade*, 2000, acrylic on linen, 125 x 150cm. RIGHT: David Bromley, *Long Tom Tjapanangka*, 2001, acrylic on cotton, 130 x 265cm. Images courtesy the artist and Peta Appleyard Gallery.



find out who will blink first. Each of these paintings has a presence and personality of its own which stands as a testament to the way in which Bromley approaches portraiture. In the same way that Andrew Denton can bring out the most intimate side of his TV guests for the camera in a dignified and respectful manner, Bromley seems to have allowed each model to express her own exposed form with a similar dignity, confidence and honesty.

Another portrait is that of celebrated Ikuntji artist Long Tom Tjapanangka. It's a massive painting, almost nine feet high, and a monument to the man who passed away in 2006. Interestingly, this work was a finalist in the 2001 Archibald Prize and has not been displayed publicly since. Quite fitting then, that it re-emerged at the gallery owned by Peta Appleyard who knew Long Tom as a child growing up at Haasts Bluff community. She would later spend time as an adolescent at nearby Mount Liebig before moving to the 'big smoke' of Alice Springs as a teen.

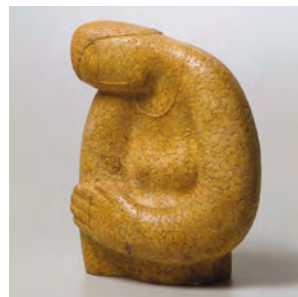
For many however, the most exciting works in the show were also the rarest: four drop sheets, once used to protect the floorboards of an old mill in Adelaide that Bromley called his studio. Three of these measure almost a metre-and-a-half high and three-and-a-half metres wide each. Glimpses of coloured overspray, drops of acrylic and the ghosts of paint tins placed upon these calico floor coverings (think a house painter's overalls) burst through to form the innards of human characters and their associated paraphernalia: boats, snakes, caravans, lighthouses, sky scrapers, dogs and crockery, the latter of which evokes a feeling of Lewis Carroll's Mad Hatter's tea party.

Curiously, Bromley is possessed of a myriad of phobias: he fears sailing, will not fly in a plane and will not



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Opening night for David Bromley exhibition, Peta Appleyard Gallery, Alice Springs. Photograph by Stephen Pearce.

go above four stories in a building. Are these massive works then, an assimilation of his greatest fears, a way of unifying them with other aspects of his personality? The human figures in this series mostly seem joyful and at ease ... is this art therapy on a grand scale?

Subject matter aside, these are incredible, spontaneous works of art; outlines drawn quickly and confidently in chalk with an infill of bold background colour (one red, one green, one gold, one apricot) appearing as an afterthought but tying each piece together and bringing resolution in gargantuan proportion. They beg comparison with the work of Jean-Michel Basquiat or David LaPlante, or even the T-shirt art popularised by Australian clothing label Mambo. Not shown since they were first painted in 2000, these are surely the most collectable and raw works available by an artist better known for his thoughtful and planned productions.

My favourite painting in the exhibition however is *Man's best friend* (1999). For me this painting is the signature image of an artist who clearly yearns for more beauty and nostalgia than modern life is prepared to offer. This sentimental painting is of a little boy and a dog. The boy is aged around nine and is filled with innocence and wonderment. He and his dalmatian friend are framed within a golden circle; it is oh so kitsch, like one of the Aeroplane Jelly advertisements of yesteryear, and yet there is

something very moving about this painting. Regardless of cliché it captures a universal gentleness at a time when the world can seem so cruel and bleak.

Given the location, this exhibition was exhilarating and at once disorienting. Out of the Todd Mall, best known for its tourist trade and Indigenous output, is the seed of a serious art scene sprouting and taking root. Art lovers in Alice Springs have been well catered to by facilities such as Araluen Arts Centre and artist-run initiatives such as Watch This Space, Studio 12 and, more recently, wonderful displays at Olive Pink Botanic Garden. But this is something different, something new: a solo show by a non-Indigenous artist of international acclaim in Todd Mall. Courageous, visionary or reckless? 'It's too early to tell', says mother of three Peta Appleyard.

The Bromley show was only the second exhibition for Peta Appleyard Gallery which opened its doors on 22 November last year with a well received showing of paintings from the Watiyawanu artists of Amunturrngu, in which epic masterpieces by major names in the Aboriginal art world – Wentja Napaltjarri and the late Bill Whiskey Tjapaltjarri – sat comfortably alongside smaller, yet no less appealing works by young emerging artists. Member for Macdonnell Alison Anderson (now NT Minister for the Arts) opened this inaugural show and spoke glowingly of the consistent contributions made by 'whitefellas' in the common ideal of getting Aboriginal art 'onto walls' and thereby forming a vital link in the continuation of a very personal culture. She applauded Ms. Appleyard's purposeful approach to establishing an ambitious new venture at a time when many are cautious.

Appleyard herself is the first to point out that she has benefited from the assistance of many in realising her dream of bringing to the town that she loves, an international standard venue; a sacrosanct and pristine environment seemingly at odds with the harsher beauty afforded by the town and its surrounds. When asked about the wisdom of doing so in uncertain economic times she is circumspect: 'This is what I do; art is my passion. How else would I entertain myself while waiting for the right time?'

An eclectic exhibition of recent works by David Bromley was exhibited at Peta Appleyard Gallery, Alice Springs, 6 February to 7 March 2009: www.petaappleyardgallery.com

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