

JEFFREY EDSON SMART AO

1921-2013



PHOTO: COURTESY OF SASHA GRISHIN

The death of Jeffrey Smart on 20 June 2013, a month short of his 92nd birthday, marks the end of an epoch in Australian art.

His was a unique talent – he made memorable, enigmatic pictures about an urban reality which was common to the experience of most Australians. As an artist, Jeffrey Smart is difficult to locate within either an Australian or an international tradition of art. While parallels may be drawn with both Edward Hopper and Balthus, two artists whom he admired, he was an artist of a very different temperament. His pictures are unmistakably and unforgettably his, they do not remind you of someone else's work, they maintain a certain autonomy within our imagination. His art champions a modern urban iconography – autostradas, road signs, factory facades, deserted airports, taxis ranks – motifs which recur throughout his oeuvre.

Smart's selection of his subjects was not a postmodernist act of aesthetic indifference but rather the opposite, the result of inspiration or, in his words, an act of enchantment. Commenting on his process of work, he noted a few years ago:

Many of my paintings have their origin in a passing glance. Something I have seen catches my eye, and I cautiously rejoice because it might be the beginning of a painting. Sometimes it is impossible to stop and sketch there because it was seen from a train or from a fast moving car on the autostrada. And it does happen that when I get back to the place, I wonder what on earth it could have been that enchanted me – it wasn't there. Enchantment is the word for it.

Many of Smart's paintings can be traced back to tiny lucid and spontaneous sketches, little visual notes made by the artist while sitting in the front seat of his car. Frequently these jottings capture the kernel of the flash of inspiration, that initial sense of enchantment with the scene, later they become the *aide-memoire* from which the larger drawings and painted studies develop. In this, Smart is an old fashioned sort of artist, where draughtsmanship is the basis of his art, the spontaneous sketch is rigorously developed into a formal drawing which then may serve as a basis for a series of oil studies. It is only when the compositional structure has been satisfactorily resolved that he moves to a final composition on a full scale canvas, where the battle with glazes and intensities of light is fought out. The process of paring down the structure of the painting until it functions through its basic formal elements is central to his practice.

Smart's selection of imagery remains striking and remarkable. This exceptionally well travelled artist, who spent the past several decades living in a tranquil Tuscan valley, about thirty kilometres outside of Arezzo, in a villa opening up to a vista of panoramic splendour, found inspiration in light on a concrete factory wall, peeling posters on building site hoardings, expressways, airport runways and bus depots. One could argue that Jeffrey Smart invented a new iconography of urban decay through which to convey, in an effective and subtle manner, his commentary on the human condition.

Jeffrey Smart was born in Adelaide, where he received his training at the Adelaide Teachers College and the South Australian School of Art and Crafts. He subsequently taught in schools in South Australia and commenced his long exhibiting career. In the late 1940s in Europe he studied at La Grand Chaumière and later the Académie Montmartre under Fernand Léger, returning to Australia in 1951. He was to remain in Sydney until 1965 where he taught and exhibited and contributed to the Australian Broadcasting Corporation children's radio programme *The Argonauts*, under the name of Phidias.

He was first taken to Italy as a child by his parents and subsequently visited Europe on many occasions before settling permanently in Tuscany in 1971. He once famously observed: 'I am a European with an Australian passport.' Smart was a staunchly figurative artist who viewed the path to abstraction as a path to artistic suicide. However he was equally opposed to artists who simply copied picturesque scenes and engaged in a reproduction of nature in their art. There is a particularly apt aphorism by Goethe that to me explains Smart's approach to art. Goethe wrote: 'The beginning and end of all literary activity is the reproduction of the world that surrounds me by the means of the world that is in me.'

Objects in Smart's paintings appear more like props or visual metaphors, rather than constituting the content of the work. Light as a mystical, spiritual and physical force is a key concern in his art, as are questions of irony and ambiguity. A recurring problem is how to express extreme individuality through abstracted generality and the impersonality of type and how to express intense emotion, yet contain it within a severe geometric structure. None of

these concerns in itself is unique to the practice of Smart, but in combination they are not encountered in the work of any other contemporary artist, and this gives his work a certain solitary existence.

Jeffrey Smart was a man of enormous generosity of spirit, humanity, humour and subtlety. Once when staying with him and his partner, Ermes De Zan, in Tuscany, he asked me to accompany him to the Arezzo industrial estate where he wanted to sketch a large and rather bleak wall of a factory seen from behind a roadway. He asked me to take a few photographs of the scene that he could use as an *aide-memoire* from which his tiny sketches could be developed into larger drawings, then into oil studies and the final painting. Later, when he examined my photographs, in exaggerated desperation he puffed out his cheeks, like those of the pet pugs which kept him company, and solemnly announced that I had missed the main point – the effects of light on the factory wall. His comment was well made; what he painted, no photograph can ever capture, it was his timeless, distilled vision of modern existence bathed in an eternal light.

Smart was the subject of numerous monographs and of a number of retrospective exhibitions, the most recent, *Master of Stillness: Jeffrey Smart Paintings 1940–2011*, completed its national tour earlier this year. He was appointed an Officer of the Order of Australia in 2001 for his service to the visual arts, and elected as an Honorary Fellow of the Australian Academy of the Humanities in 2008.

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