BERNARD SMITH
1916-2011

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BERNARD Smith will be remembered as the first truly Australian art historian, who consistently and tenaciously saw the need to develop and describe an aesthetic suited to a contemporary democratic Australian society.

Before the Second World War few people were interested in Australian art. Smith's first book, *Place, Taste and Tradition: A Study of Australian Art Since 1788*, was the earliest account of Australian art to be taken seriously. Written as a series of adult education lectures during the war, it soon found a publisher who issued it in a modest edition in 1945 (a more substantial revised edition, issued in 1979, is better known). He took Marx's historical materialism as his method, an act that both encouraged and irritated others to provide alternative accounts of the same tradition, but always building on Smith's groundwork. Its wartime origins gave it an understandably nationalist edge and it ended with a vigorous polemic in favour of contemporary social realist artists, Noel Counihan, Vic O'Connor and Josl Bergner, who continued to be favourites. (His monumental biography, *Noel Counihan: Artist and Revolutionary*, appeared in 1993.)

Place, Taste and Tradition fuelled a healthy debate among artists and critics concerning nationalism and realism and the search for an Australian subject matter. In world art history it was the first Marxist interpretation of an artistic culture. He loved finding a new nomenclature for art historical periods and movements. In this first book Smith coined the word 'Postmodernism' in relation to art, later wrote of a c. 1900 'Federation Style' within Australian architecture (it was already established for American architecture of a century earlier), and much later, in *Modernism's History: A Study in Twentieth-Century Art and Ideas* (1998) and *The Formalesque: A Guide to Modern Art and its History* (2007) Smith coined the less popular 'Formalesque'. In his teaching Smith encouraged students to redefine art with novel terms. His seminar on William Blake in the print room of Melbourne's National Gallery of Victoria required students to find an original nomenclature to describe the imagery of Blake's Illustrations to Dante. It was unforgettable for all who were there, among them, in the 1960s, the present writer.

Bernard William Smith was born on 3 October 1916 in Sydney, the illegitimate son of an immigrant Irish woman, Rose Anne Tierney, and an Englishman, Charles Smith, from York. He was an outstanding student, graduating dux of Enmore High School in Sydney in 1933 after which, from 1935 to 1944, he was a schoolteacher in rural New South Wales. A scholarship boy, his formation was an unconventional one when compared with other pioneering art historians in Australia, who all came from privileged European backgrounds, displaced by the

Diaspora after the Second World War. In 1944, the year before *Place, Taste and Tradition* was published, he was seconded from the Education Department of New South Wales as education officer at the Art Gallery of New South Wales, responsible for a programme of travelling art exhibitions throughout the state. In 1945, while at the Art Gallery, Smith embarked on a study of classical archaeology in evening classes at the University of Sydney with Dale Trendall, an experience that he proudly remembered as fundamental to his formative development. This is evident in his essay 'Notes on Elitism and the Arts' (*Meanjin*, 1975), where he analyses the Greek notion of elitism to its disadvantage, compares Australian elitism to fascism, and argues passionately in favour of a broadly based democratic theory of excellence, inspired by a reconsideration of French and British Utopian Socialists. In these early years Smith tried to become an artist, took classes in Sydney at the Julian Ashton Art School and exhibited as 'Joseph Tierney', using his unmarried mother's surname. Only two paintings survive, *The Advance of Lot and his Brethren* (1940) and *Pompeii* (1940), both at the National Gallery of Australia; though surrealist in style, they are seemingly conservative in subject matter but also proclaim two themes with which he was at times preoccupied: incest and classicism.

Always precocious, Smith interrupted his part-time undergraduate studies to begin postgraduate research, undertaken at the Warburg Institute in London from 1948 to 1951, for his doctorate on the origins of European art in Australia. He had won a British Council scholarship and postponed completion of his undergraduate degree. The initial English reaction to his choice of subject was disbelief, for, as he liked to say, the reigning sovereigns in art history considered that all the Europeans brought to the Pacific was the Bible and syphilis. With spirited advice from Charles Mitchell, his supervisor, and in the genial company of Rudolph Wittkower, he began to develop ideas that saw fruition in his book *European Vision and the South Pacific 1768-1850* (1960), still generally acknowledged as the most influential and original work of scholarship produced by an Australian art historian.

Smith was the first to study how the earliest European artists in the South Seas represented the very different kinds of flora and fauna encountered in the Pacific, and to pose questions as to how these artists' styles and concepts were affected by genuinely novel and non-European experiences. Smith later returned to these subjects in a series of magnificently illustrated, well-researched volumes, *The Art of the First Fleet and Other Early Australian Drawings* (1988, with Alwyne Wheeler) and *The Art of Captain Cook's Voyages* (1985-8, with Rüdiger Joppien), both published in association with the Australian Academy of the Humanities.

After his few years in Europe, where he not only worked at the Warburg Institute but also travelled widely, Smith returned to Australia and on 1 January 1951 again took up his education officer position at the Art Gallery of New South Wales. This time, over two years, he prepared a catalogue of the Gallery's collection of Australian paintings, which was published in 1953. Simultaneously, at the University of Sydney, he resumed his undergraduate degree, which was completed in 1952. He next held a Senior Research Fellowship at the Australian National University in Canberra, where he worked with Jim Davidson, who suggested he compile the catalogue of paintings by Cook's artists. He was already in touch with Joseph Burke, inaugural Herald Professor of Fine Arts at the University of Melbourne, who was keen to appoint him to the Melbourne department.

In 1955 Bernard Smith was appointed as a lecturer to the Fine Arts Department at the University of Melbourne, where he completed a triad of formidable scholars, joining Professor Burke, an English specialist in eighteenth-century art, and the Viennese scholar Franz Philipp, lecturer in Renaissance art history. Together they gave a generation of students an enviable understanding of art history. Students in the 1960s such as Patrick McCaughey, Margaret Manion, Margaret Plant, Virginia Spate, Robert Gaston, Terry Smith and myself, remember this period as a life-enhancing and unforgettable experience. Many graduates went on to have distinguished careers, among which there would be four female professors, surely a record for any department in the world at that time.

In 1959 Smith convened the group of artists for whom he wrote the Antipodean Manifesto, a declaration of the value of figurative painting, as a catalogue essay for the only exhibition by the group. In some ways it was his least attractive act. All his life, like his mentor Ernst Gombrich, Bernard disliked abstract painting as well as hating (more understandably) predictability and fashion in art and its history. In alliance with the painters Charles Blackman, Arthur Boyd, David Boyd, John Brack, Robert Dickerson, John Perceval and Clifton Pugh, Bernard signed the Manifesto. In reaction to the Melbourne push, a 'Sydney 9' group was formed in 1961, enabling their spokesperson, the brilliant young critic Robert Hughes, to defend the values of contemporary abstraction and American influences. In Melbourne from 1963 to 1966 Bernard Smith took the role of art critic on *The Age* newspaper, believing that the constant act of reviewing was the only means of understanding contemporary art.

In 1962 Smith published his authoritative standard work, *Australian Painting 1788-1960*, which, with expansions up to 1970, 1990 and 2000 has been continuously in print for more than half a century. Of all his books it reached the widest audience and established the study of Australian painting in universities and museums. Everyone read it and it was a best seller over many decades. Bernard Smith himself contributed the first update, three chapters that

Humanities_AnnRep2012.indd 40 22/10/12 9:19 AM

covered the 1960s. Terry Smith updated it in 1991 with the significant inclusion of contemporary Aboriginal art, and in 2001 Christopher Heathcote contributed the third and final update, which created a fourth edition. Bernard Smith never wished to refine or edit his own text, so *Australian Painting* remains very much a voice of the nineteen-sixties with later addenda by other voices.

His time as art critic on *The Age* caused an overload of information about a single decade, the 1960s, in the second edition of *Australian Painting*. A more judicious way of attending to the then contemporary scene was Smith's general editorship of a series of well illustrated small 'Australian Art Monographs': *Sali Herman* by Daniel Thomas and *Clifton Pugh* by Noel Macainsh (both 1962), *John Olsen* (1963) by Virginia Spate, and *Charles Blackman* (1965) by Ray Mathew.

His engagement with the world of contemporary art led to Bernard Smith's appointment on 9 January 1967 as founding Power Professor of Contemporary Art and Director of the Power Institute at the University of Sydney, where he remained until his retirement in 1977. Only the second art history department created in Australia, a $2 million establishing bequest from the expatriate cubist artist John Power (1881-1943) required it to 'make available to the people of Australia the latest ideas and theories concerning contemporary art by means of lectures and teaching, and by the purchase of the most recent contemporary art of the world'.

The Power Institute's courses were structured according to media: Professor Smith for painting, Donald Brook for Sculpture, and David Saunders for Architecture. An ambitious Power Research Library for contemporary art was created. The Power Gallery's first curators, Gordon Thomson from 1967 and Elwyn Lynn from 1969, started an international contemporary-art collection that was exhibited extensively in Sydney and elsewhere in Australia; the collection later transferred from University control to the associated but largely independent Museum of Contemporary Art that opened on a site superbly accessible to 'the people of Australia' on city-centre Circular Quay, Sydney, in 1989.

A nationwide programme of annual public lectures, the Power Lectures in Contemporary Art, began in 1968 with the celebrity New York critic Clement Greenberg, and the first six were published in 1975 as *Concerning Contemporary Art: The Power Lectures 1968-73*. In the department's inaugural year a Power Studio for Australian artists was endowed at the Cité International des Arts in Paris.

As in Melbourne, a formidable number of art-history students achieved great distinction, among them Joanna Mendelssohn, Andrew McNamara and Rex Butler.

Bernard Smith's publications during his Power Institute years included *Documents on Art and Taste in Australia: The Colonial Period 1770-1914* (1975) and his own collection *The Antipodean Manifesto: Essays in Art and History* (1976). Co-authored with his environmental-activist wife Kate Smith, *The Architectural Character of Glebe, Sydney* (1973, about the suburb where they lived) was where he promulgated the notion of a 'Federation Style' in Australian architecture.

After ten years as Power Professor at the University of Sydney, Smith was succeeded in 1977 by his onetime Melbourne student Virginia Spate, and returned to live and write in Melbourne. There his former department at the University of Melbourne made him Professor Emeritus until his death in 2011.

At a national level Bernard Smith cared passionately about the humanities. Already in the 1950s he had participated in the Education Through Art movement and edited a collection of Australian conference papers introduced by the British celebrity critic Herbert Read. Most significant, however, for the place of art history within the humanities, was his dedication to the establishment of an Australian Academy of the discipline.

He was one of the fifty-one Foundational Fellows of the Australian Academy of the Humanities, established by Royal Charter in 1969 to advance knowledge of, and the pursuit of excellence in, the humanities. Bernard Smith had also been a member of the Academy's predecessor, the Australian Humanities Research Council (AHRC). He served as secretary of the AHRC from 1963 to 1965 and as a member of both the AHRC Australian UNESCO Committee (1965-8) and the David Nichol Smith Memorial Seminar Committee (1964-70).

The highest distinction in scholarship in the humanities was (and is) required of candidates for election to the Fellowship of the Australian Academy of the Humanities, and Smith's appointment as a Foundation Fellow of this important institution is a testament to his standing amongst not only his peers in art history and criticism but also those in the broader humanities. Bernard Smith was a dedicated servant of the Academy, serving on Council during 1976-83, and as President of the Academy from 1977 to 1980. During his Presidency the Academy expanded its networks and membership by instituting two new categories of Fellows, namely Senior Fellow and Overseas Fellow. At this time he also worked hard to promote a stronger relationship with both the Chinese and Japanese Humanities Academies through several joint projects such as the *Language Atlas of the Pacific Area* (1981-3, edited by S. A. Wurm and Shirô Hattori, with cartography by Theo Baumann, in collaboration with the Japan Academy), and exchange programmes such as the successful Australia/China Exchange Agreement, as mentioned in his friend Stuart Macintyre's *The Poor Relation: A History of Social sciences in Australia* (2010).

Humanities_AnnRep2012.indd 41 22/10/12 9:19 AM

During his term as President, Professor Smith chaired the 10th Annual General Meeting of the Academy. As well as serving ex officio on various other Academy committees he served on the Bicentenary Committee, formed in March 1977, which studied special projects and conferences in connection with the celebrations for 1988. The Dictionary of Australian English on Historical Principles Project was unfortunately abandoned due to a lack of financial support, but the History of Culture in Australia Project, of which Smith was a member of the steering committee (annual seminars, the first being held in September 1979 at the Australian National University), went ahead successfully. The Bicentenary Committee in turn endorsed the creation of a steering committee for the History of Culture in Australia project (with help from the History of Ideas Unit at the ANU and the University of New South Wales) in which Professor Smith was involved heavily. At a national level he was also an advisor to the ANU's *Australian Dictionary of Biography*.

In 1978 Professor Smith delivered the Academy's 9th Annual Lecture, entitled *Art as Information: Captain Cook's Voyages*, which was published in the 1979 *Proceedings*. This was eventually followed by the publication, in honour of the 1988 Bicentennial year, of the four-volume *Art of Captain Cook's Voyages*, edited by Rüdiger Joppien and Bernard Smith and published by Oxford University Press in association with the Australian Academy of the Humanities. An excerpt from Smith's Presidential address at the 1980 Academy AGM: 'This is my last Annual General Meeting as your President. It has been a very great honour indeed, and I shall treasure it until such a time as the Secretary finds it necessary to move me up to Item II [Obituaries].'

In 1984 Smith published his autobiography *The Boy Adeodatus: The Portrait of a Lucky Young Bastard*. Among art historians' autobiographies it is unique in that it is a moving literary masterpiece. Comparing the circumstances of his own illegitimate birth with those of St Augustine's son, Smith wrote an account of his early childhood, in homage to the two mothers who reared him. Were it not for the fact that his biological mother, Rose Anne Tierney, was a Catholic, he would have been aborted, hence the name 'gift of God' or Adeodatus. The autobiography opens with an evocative description of a lush, enclosed paradise garden where he was reared by his foster mother, Mum Keene, and which is gradually disturbed by knowledge and maturity. The fruitful Australian garden is a microcosm of the South Pacific, a paradise that is gradually disturbed and charted by European voyagers. He created a different literary style for the book, to contrast with his art historical writings. For this adopted child, his two mothers, neither of whom he rejected, represented both European and Australian culture.

The young schoolteacher Smith wished to become an artist, but soon realised that he was more gifted as a writer than painter. It was a wise decision and his autobiography has been awarded three Australian literary prizes. His wife Kate Beatrice Hartley Challis, whom he married in 1941, was also a foundling and this mutual experience was a great bond between them. Kate Challis was an honours graduate of London University, and like young Bernard Smith, she taught in schools; they had two children, Elizabeth and John. After Kate's death, Bernard wrote an autobiographical book about their lives together, *A Pavane for Another Time* (2002), which she had forbade him to undertake in her lifetime.

In Kate's memory Smith established the Raka prize, to be awarded to Aboriginal Australian artists, beginning in 1991, in a five-year cycle in turn privileging indigenous artists, poets, novelists, musicians and playwrights. The generous award, given annually by the University of Melbourne, has been of great significance. The recipients have included some of the most celebrated indigenous artists, Lin Onus (1993), Tracey Moffatt (1994), Brook Andrew (1998), Ricky Maynard (2000), and Warwick Thornton (2009) to name a few, see: http://australian-centre.unimelb.edu.au/prizes-awards/raka.html.

Smith had to omit almost any reference to indigenous art in his *Australian Painting 1788-1960*, a book that consolidated the existing literature rather than presented a body of primary research; at the time a literature of Aboriginal art as art, as distinct from ethnography, was only just emerging. His legacy to his beloved wife was to make her a muse of Australian indigenous arts in five different forms.

Bernard Smith was a wonderfully generous art historian. He aimed to create the very best circumstances for scholarship in Australia about material culture, and succeeded. We will all remember him as an extraordinary scholar of great integrity.

• JAYNIE ANDERSON