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STATE OF THE ART



Margaret Dredge – Retrospective 1960 to 2001

On 2 April an important retrospective, *Margaret Dredge 1960 to 2001*, opens at the Shoalhaven City Arts Centre. This retrospective builds on the 16 works held in the M G Dingle & G B Hughes Collection that have been bequested to the Shoalhaven Regional Gallery Collection and while those 16 works form a mini-survey of the artists career, dating from 1964 to 1997 and covering most artistic periods, the retrospective places them in a wider context.

The exhibition is important to the history of women artists in Australia as, with echoes of Grace Cossington Smith, it brings to light a body of work of an artist whose artistic output and place in the development of abstract art in Australia has been inadequately recognized by the mainstream. An artist, who for most of her career worked outside the scrutiny of the art media, who felt she did not want to be a part of the “politics” and “current” fashions of a gender biased art world.

Born Margaret Vickery in 1928 in Murrumbeena, Victoria, her mother died during childbirth in 1930 and Margaret was raised by her widowed father, William, a Gallipoli veteran. Between 1930 and 1940 they boarded in seventeen different households from Albert Park to South Yarra, mainly with elderly widows, before eventually settling in Sandringham. Even as a teenager Margaret was interested in studying art, and wanted to study at the National Gallery (of Victoria) School. An intelligent young woman who longed to expand her knowledge of art and culture, a trait that motivated her all her life. But her father insisted on academic studies and then secretarial work.

Margaret Dredge's initial art training commenced in the mid 1950's with Inez Hutchinson, then Nancy Grant and Robert Grieve. Dredge's early paintings were figurative and still life works, but her output soon led into abstraction, which was to become the focus of her artistic development.

Her talent was quickly recognised and while 1961-79 was an intense period with numerous group exhibitions she also had five solo shows. The third solo exhibition at the Argus Gallery bought her name to critical attention, and over the period there were positive reviews by Alan McCullochⁱ, Bernard Smithⁱⁱ, Patrick McCaugheyⁱⁱⁱ and Harry Blake^{iv} who observed that the

artist had “...already achieved a status many strive for all their lives. Her work has the painterly quality of an outstanding talent”. Though positive, the reviews also included references to feminist art and “woman artist”, as if the art made by women was by some separate ‘species’.

Her art changed from expressionistic abstractions developed in the early 1960’s to an exploration of post-painterly abstraction trends occurring internationally, especially in the USA, generally held to be a reaction to abstract expressionism, the dictum was that the artist should exclude self expression. By 1973 Dredge changed from using oils to acrylics and re-introduced self expressive language into her painting. It was also following this period that Dredge virtually withdrew from exhibiting publicly. She continued working over the next twenty-two years, but only participated in group shows five times between 1980 and 1992 and not at all between 1992 and 2001.

The reasons for the artist’s withdrawal were many but included attitudes to women artists and the “politics” of the art world; Dredge’s letters to *The Age* slamming an anti Germaine Greer review and defending artists against malicious criticism being examples of her passion.

Through the nineties she developed a lyric, almost calligraphic style. Less dense, a softer approach, as if the artist has expended the initial exuberance of first finding her exclusive and personal freedom and is now starting to examine in detail the layers of meaning and emotion embedded in the act of painting. The reality of Dredge’s paintings is established by the paint itself, applied thickly, by brush, palette knife and hand forming a sumptuous feast of mark making, such an uneasy vision that the eye finds difficulty finding rest in any particular place, constantly driven to explore a complex web. Her paintings are best understood when we do not expect a meaning and understand that abstract painting can be its own subject, its own world.

By the end of the decade Dredge had developed her love of painting into a lyricism that was articulate and emotionally moving. When she died in September 2001, Margaret Dredge left a legacy of outstanding works of art, the last works are by an artist at the peak of her powers, masterpieces of articulate and mature painting.

The “Margaret Dredge – Retrospective 1960 to 2001” exhibition is at the Shoalhaven City Arts Centre from 2 April to 22 May 2013.

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- i Alan McCulloch The Herald 3 March 1965
- ii Bernard Smith Review of Argus Exhibition The Age July 1965
- iii Patrick McCaughey *A Painter Apart* The Age 27 Sept 1967
- iv Harry Blake *Margaret Dredge exhibition an eye-catcher* The Sun 5 Oct 1967