

Section One
BIOGRAPHICAL CONTEXT



BIOGRAPHICAL SUMMARY

- 1921 Ailsa Margaret Donaldson born Melbourne, 26 January, second daughter of Ralph and Margaret Donaldson
- 1920s Lived first in Heyfield and then Portland
and 30s Attended school Portland, Victoria
- 1936 Matriculated MacRobertson High School, Melbourne
- 1937-38 General Art Course, Melbourne Technical College
- 1938 Joined Contemporary Art Society at its first meeting and exhibited paintings and drawings with the society for several years
- 1939 Teacher training, Melbourne Teachers College
Weekend art classes, George Bell Studio
- 1940-43 Taught in Victorian high and technical schools
- 1942 Married fellow artist Vic O'Connor
- 1944 Son Sean born
Joined Communist Party of Australia and continued membership throughout her life
- 1945 First prize for painting in 'Women in Industry' section, 'Australia at War' exhibition
- 1946 Daughter Megan born
- 1945-55 Political activist among women in Melbourne's inner suburbs
- 1950-55 Victorian secretary of Union of Australian Women
- 1953 Attended World Congress of Women in Copenhagen as Victorian delegate. Visited Poland and Rumania

- First Prize May Day Art prize (for a painting of French women demonstrating against arms to Vietnam)
- 1953-56 An initiator and organiser of Asian Australian Child Art Exchange (an attempt to counter the cold war and anti-Asian climate of the period)
- 1955-70 Resumed full time work as secondary art teacher in various Melbourne schools
- 1950s Exhibited with Realist Group (including
and 60s Noel Counihan, Mary Hammond, Herbert McLintock, Vic O'Connor, Jim Wigley and others)
- 1962-64 After 1962 exhibited sculpture primarily Retraining. Diploma of Sculpture, Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology
- 1965 Studied Fine Arts at Melbourne University for Fellowship Diploma of Sculpture
- 1966 Divorced
- 1971 Visited Greece and Italy
Joint exhibition with Mary Hammond
- 1972 Commenced full time work in sculpture
- 1975 First solo exhibition of sculpture and drawings Russell Davis Gallery
- 1977 Travelled in China
- 1978 Group exhibition at the McClelland Regional Gallery - 'The Human Form and Other Animals'
- 1979 Lived in Italy for eight months
Won Caulfield City Council Invitation Art Award
Joint exhibition of sculpture and drawings with Mary Hammond, Trades Hall Gallery
- 1970s Wrote numerous articles, reviews, conference papers on feminist art movement
- 1980 3 February, died Melbourne, aged fifty-nine, of cancer

WHAT HAS HAPPENED TO WOMEN ARTISTS -
A PERSONAL VIEW

This paper was given to a Women's Art Forum meeting at the Ewing Gallery, Melbourne University in May 1976. Four women artists outlined their views of what had happened to themselves as women in art between 1945 and the present. The others speaking were Mary Hammond, Jean Gough and Mary McQueen.

One can only give a personal view. From the individual stories we get a more accurate understanding of the whole experience.

First a few background facts: a comparison between the numbers going through art schools forty years ago and now. In 1939 the total number of secondary teachers in art in training was five; now there could be hundreds annually. (That training is for some people the only way of entering an art career.) From the gallery schools a similar ratio exists - the kind of training available now is longer, more intensive, a wider technical range is covered - it is much more professional in its coverage of art history and theory, and yet very one-sided, very narrow in some respects.

It is common to meet students who can tell you all about minimal art, but don't know the names of practising artists living in their own community, or who made any of the sculptures in our streets or parks.

Checking back on catalogues, reviews, gallery purchases, prizes, and so on, one finds a fair proportion of women coming to the fore in the earlier period. Alan McCulloch, Bernard Smith and others do not present an almost exclusively male

scenario for the periods they deal with (McCulloch finds nearly 400 women over 200 years worthy of mention).

Today critics like McCaughey, and others in the United States and elsewhere tend to concentrate attention exclusively on the emerging male talent. (The characteristics of that fashionable *avant garde* should be studied closely - if women *don't* figure there perhaps there are factors *intrinsic to the style* that exclude women, rather than that women perform poorly or have a pedestrian imagination.)

We must ask ourselves first, however, where do all the women go who do so well in art schools and seem to drop out of view? Why, with modern labour saving devices and the Pill, do they not persevere as their sisters in the 1930s did? And why is there this tendency towards those who are exhibiting and working consistently of a Lewis Carroll manoeuvre - they are invisible, or they have shrunk obligingly to fit the story being told?

Perhaps some of our individual histories suggest some of the answers. To give a few details about myself: I was one of three girls. Father and mother were self-educated people, worked in bakery businesses through the depression years, trying to afford education for their daughters. Things were hard, but as a family, we took an interests in the world.

I left home at fifteen, was at school in Melbourne, and at sixteen commenced an art course at Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology on a technical scholarship which paid an allowance of £7 a term plus fees. I used up two years of the four-year scholarship, managed to cram in a teaching course as well as a fine art course by going to classes every night, then a further year of teacher training; and at nineteen I was on the payroll in front of those large wartime classes of Brunswick boys, ousted from their classrooms by the needs of airforce trainees.

So much happened in that three years, 1937 to 1940. I was avid for art, went to all the fiery meetings of artists, joined the Contemporary Art

Society and identified with the radical moderns versus Menzies and the Academicians. The streets were full of strangely dressed people fleeing from Hitler; some were young artists, some had first rate collections of modern German art. There was Aid for Spain, Sheepskins for Russia, the first continental films (Jean Gabin at the Savoy theatre); I became engaged to an art student. We met at the Saturday classes at George Bell's school - I had sold my old school books and uniform to pay the fees.

When war looked like breaking out I was a pacifist and thought Chamberlain's appeasement was all right. Later I began to understand that you had to fight for peace.

We started off married life with the proceeds of a prize in the 'Australia at War' Exhibition - an unfurnished flat and two Persian rugs we were paying off at five shillings a week. Naturally I thought I was frightfully emancipated. We bought a copy of Havelock Ellis to get over some initial hurdles, but I, a country girl, had had such a reserved upbringing I didn't know the simple facts about birth. So when the baby I wanted arrived the adjustment was quite traumatic.

I identified strongly with the women involved in the war overseas, and had some crayon drawings in the Contemporary Art Society in the 1942 'Anti-Fascist Exhibition' which were mentioned by the *Bulletin* critic. I was the only woman exhibitor in that show. For the 'Australia at War' show, in 1945, I painted young working girls strolling home from factory jobs in Brunswick and Richmond streets where I had observed them - a sort of romantic view of girls in that landscape. I thought I was made when I received a prize in the section 'Women in Industry', but must admit today that not many artists were interested in that section. Why I wonder?

I was reading Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, Engels, Faulkner, Hemingway and the like at the time - my reading taste tended to follow the lead of the man in my life. The painters we admired were Gropper, Evergood, Picasso, Braque and above all Kollwitz.

All the above indicates that I was naturally part of the idealistic left, and I joined the Communist

Party of Australia in 1944 after the birth of my first child. I mention this not to be divisive, but because it has some bearing on my view of today's problems.

It wasn't long before I began to feel a loss of identity as an artist, though I had commenced marriage with a feeling of equal potential. Vitality drops with child rearing, we were poor, but it was more than that. I felt the need for some creative sphere that I could enter into very privately, and so I took up political struggle. My instinctive feminism had to be suppressed because that was a time when we spoke of a 'united front', men and women acting together in solidarity. However, I tried to bring cultural methods of work into organisations that were focusing on the problem of women in the homes and factories. In that way I tried to fob off my inner guilt at deserting, temporarily, my real love - art. I was an activist among women for nine years.

Then came fifteen years when it was necessary to return to full-time teaching to bolster up a home that was coming apart.

During all this time - about thirty years - I never ceased to plan some day to be fully involved in art. The question was how, when?

During all this time I painted intermittently, and exhibited with the group of friends who were dubbed 'social realists' by the press - a term they would have been modest about claiming. We had group shows every year or two during the 1950s and early 1960s. Running parallel with the abstract expressionist phase and the Antipodeans, whose figuration disclaimed any connection with social concern, the group of realists were really a counter stream - almost an underground within the art world here - and were ignored officially, though their work sold well with certain sections of the public.

Within that group of fairly like-minded people - by now there were two women, Mary Hammond and myself - it was still a case of little sister, big brother. Hard to express why we felt like that. I think the Women's Liberation Movement has the answer - sex-role-playing is the dominant factor

in most relationships. Our men didn't really see us; we hardly saw ourselves. Sure, they liked emancipated women, but when you looked around these seemed to be stereotype women, bent on playing the 'good mate' role, gutsy and extroverted to a degree. It took me thirty years to understand this contradiction between ideology and behaviour in myself and others.

The big change in my fortunes came towards the end of my teaching career when I had a chance to do a retraining course, and I chose sculpture which I'd always wanted to work at. From then on everything fell into place. After some ill health, I was able to leave teaching. I built a comfortable studio in 1971, and working there regularly my work expands and at last I feel myself to be seriously involved. At the same time I began studying all the new feminist literature, and benefited from the insights there which supported my personal experiences.

These personal details are difficult to compress and the main thing we want to look at is our collective situation; still, I hope that I have sketched in something helpful about one woman's story.

Before concluding, I would like to touch on how I see the big-name art world in relation to women artists.

I see it as an establishment, almost an industry, highly involved with backup activity in publishing and promotions. All this is unprecedented in history. It is possible even for those who are taken up, who are allowed in, to be thrown on the rubbish heap soon after. Critics express surprise if a man of sixty has a further success. So this new art, with its very forced spontaneity, functions quite obviously as a branch of the media - as part of the super-structure of ideas which Marxists always claimed must be weighted one way or the other in a political sense.

Mental and physical breakdown is common among those who manage to perform well in this hot-house esoteric world. More and more there is a sameness about the work; it is *so cool*, it is remote emotionally, pictures and sculptures leave no vibrating image on the memory. However it does

have a strong image quality - a *total* quality pervades all the work, rather than that a single work is memorable. This overall quality I find is hostile to me as a person. I am aware of this quality of hostility in practically all of the work of the New York school and most of their local imitators. I think many women artists could feel as I do - repelled and daunted by this establishment image which has no describable shape but rather spells out a message implicitly: 'You, little people, don't matter; only this vast edifice we are part of does'. The Rockefeller-Guggenheim mystique manages to colour all this fashionable art in some indefinable way, and only those who honestly believe in power games and the aesthetics of impact for its own sake are equipped to serve its cause - to stand in the chorus line, so to speak. I think most women are fundamentally alienated from this atmosphere whether they are aware of it or not. Essentially it denies by implication the existence of humanity at large, and women are objectified to the level of a cypher only. I dispute the claim that it is a radical revolutionary art. I find it servile and conformist in the extreme.

But, on a more hopeful note, I also think there is a limit to the life time of any phenomenon which runs counter to human experience, and in the cautious steps back from this non-world to even the synthetic neo-realism appearing now, I detect that the thing may have reached its limit.

The time seems to be right to assert very strongly our way of seeing life, with sympathy, with humour and warmth, with anger directed at the things we abhor, with sentiment if necessary. Why work according to someone else's rules? We just have to ignore academic commentators who may be wiser after the event, and plough ahead with faith in the validity of our own feelings.

Within this range there is ample room for any style. But perhaps what is most needed is art with a cutting edge, not too smooth, rather more challenging.

Another way we could help ourselves might be in reviving the co-operative sort of project which unleashes talents, brings people together and

pushes their work up a notch higher in quality.

Collective initiatives of the sort which launched the Women's Art Movement are needed more and more. One that I would like to see would open up debate around ideologies current in art. Because we live scattered so far apart, we have to organise times to talk freely together. That was the advantage of the groups which frequented certain pubs and cafes when this city was smaller and more human in scale. Women were only on the edge of that scene. Both men and women could benefit today if there was more debate away from the awesome verbiage of the university crowd.

In a diary entry on coming home from the meeting Ailsa wrote:
My feeling after such a resounding success as this meeting - 'If you think, if you feel, if then you act, you must succeed.' Every endeavour approached in this way will be a great success ... It is marvellous how things are brewing up just now and ever so many of the younger people excited and congratulatory.

BEING UNDERGROUND DURING THE HEROIC YEARS

These are notes for an illustrated talk to the Hamilton Art Gallery Society, Hamilton, Victoria, on 22 August 1977 on the Herald Exhibition The Heroic Years of Australian Painting 1940-1965. The following text is taken from handwritten notes and was not prepared as a formal paper.

Alan McCulloch has termed the period covered by the current exhibition the 'Heroic Years'.

One could interpret him:
these artists were heroic?
theirs was an heroic struggle?
these paintings are heroic?

My own feeling about the show when I first saw it was an overall impression of rather solid heavy form and heavy colour, *structure*. That surprised me; one had not been so aware of certain qualities *during* the period when most of these works were first shown. As an artist connected with a tendency which is hardly represented in this collection, I cannot help but see much of the work as an *avoidance* rather than an acceptance of challenge.

The challenge I refer to confronted Australian art during the war years, was hurriedly buried after the war in all spoken and published discussion, but never quite died, and has recently come into *clöser* focus.

This challenge was connected with the artist's role within society - a question still not resolved.

Twentieth century art reacted restlessly to World War 1, on the one hand with cynicism and despair, as in Dada and Futurism, and on the other hand with potent humanism and passion as with Barlach and Kollwitz.

Was the artist's commitment primarily to his own subjective sensation, or was it the objective world where, in the social setting, other dramas and experiences took place involving society at large?

The reference to my situation during those 'Heroic Years' is a rather ironic one of being *underground* in several senses. I had been involved in three areas of struggle - the left socialist movement, the art world, and the militant women's struggle - since the age of twenty. It is hard for me now to separate those three areas in my recollections, because at long last they are interwoven. At the time each area existed at the expense of the others. For many years it was frustrating and distressing to find oneself living life as a series of 'little boxes'. It took quite an effort to 'get myself all together', to put the various roles or 'little boxes' into one framework - myself. To a large extent it has only been historically possible since the 1970s.

I want to begin describing

- the counter stream of realist, socially oriented art which appeared during the war;
- what my connection there was;
- how it threatened the dominant trends in post-war art;
- what the vision of Australian 'social realism' really was and how that vision survived.

Also, I wish to speak as an individual *woman* artist, because my experiences are repeated in one way or another by many women in all social groupings. Not until recent years, and the advent of a feminist audience, have we experienced any real conviction as to our validity, or had encouragement.

The situation of art in the 1938-39 period within Australia

Although European art saw tremendous upheavals in style, especially from about 1890 onwards, our art had tended to continue in a fairly settled academic way until the late 1930s. Our early moderns in Sydney and Melbourne produced stimulating work in the decade preceding, but were a not very influential minority.



Early drawing of woman with child

Around the 1938-39 period we had a very lively time combatting the Australian Academy of Art which stood for safe conformity. The Contemporary Art Society was a partisan movement for *modern* art. Nowadays this does not raise any hackles, but was highly radical at the time. Every conservative choked over 'modern art' from the Kaiser to Hitler, and here we had R.G. Menzies and that establishment.

After that struggle was won, other issues presented - the war and its implications - then the post-war backlash against what had been gained.

Every social movement has its roots in preceding periods. For us, once we abandoned our provisional isolation, problems both of style and of ideology challenged us.

With the arrival of intellectuals and professionals fleeing from Hitler's Germany, completely new currents were stirred up. They brought with them art collections representing a broad European rather than British culture, and moreover their ideas and expressions (social, political, artistic) which, so to speak, dragged us screaming into the twentieth century.

What were these ideas and experiences?

- There was their connection with an anti-fascist struggle brought vividly into our midst
- There was the recognition of a socially oriented art, a new contemporary form.
- There was the background of earthy expressionism in style.
- There was the respect accorded to these matters, and the great interest these newcomers displayed in any local work which was groping in a similar direction.

People like the Singer and Lippman families; artists like Vassilieff, Bergner, Herman, the Wentchers; many musicians and composers like Felix Werder; their own knowledge of art; works which were new to us; all brought us into touch with vital European art, an influence sorely lacking hitherto. Their lithographs of Kathe Kollwitz were a major influence after 1942.

To young artists like myself who had grown up here through the Depression years, who had witnessed the saga of unemployed going from town to town (as

we saw in Portland), whose education was reduced by miserable state cut-backs, who now saw aghast a world war looming (the hopelessness of youth everywhere sucked into another war as our parents had been) - all this made sense! We became committed socialists and anti-fascists, and regarded our work in art as a way of communicating our view of the world.

People I had immediate contact with after 1938 included Ambrose Dyson, Vic O'Connor (married 1942), Noel Counihan, Yosl Bergner, Felix Werder, Judah Waten, Alan Marshall, the Palmers, John Morrison, Harry de Hartog, Eric Smith, F. Dalby Davison, P. Goldhar, Herz Bergner, also James Wigley and Sam Fullbrook.

Within this circle (more especially the painters - although the stimulus from the writers was strong) I was a very young, immature person struggling to find my own way, somewhat daunted by the talents and confidence of others.

I joined the Contemporary Art Society in 1938 and exhibited in the large annual shows which were a feature of those years.

If one studies the catalogues of 1940 one sees that most of the work there was a reaction to post-impressionism and to a lesser extent to surrealism. The urban scene and social scene are hinted at a little by Dobell, Herman, Tucker and Vassilieff.

By 1942 the war had impinged very strongly on everyone's consciousness, and we see in the catalogue for the Anti-Fascist Show a completely new identification with subjects hitherto unseen: Aborigines, Negroes, Refugees, Air Raids, Army Life.

My own work reflects this new awareness between 1940 and 1942.

Many discussions around ideology and theory took place during the war years (usually accompanied by very loud Mozart piano concertos played with hard needles). In the Contemporary Art Society a clear division showed up between those artists grouped around John Reed (who later formed the Museum of Modern Art) and ourselves. The other group were Tucker, Nolan, Boyd, Percival. Joy Hester and

Yvonne Lennie were their slightly invisible women members (as I was within the left group). Later a split in the Society occurred.

In European wartime art a similar cleavage occurred - Existentialist philosophy became 'the rage' after starting as an *enfant terrible*. In general the one tendency emphasised the *communal agony*, the other focused on the *private and personal* trauma. The philosophical divergences either connected left to Marx or right to Nietzsche.

They talked about myth - we talked about humanity. In a way we may have meant the same things, but communication was blocked at that point.

In style both groups were heavily influenced by German expressionism (but that was such a wide movement that elements of grotesque nihilism were present as well as empathy with its ravaged subjects).

In his history *Australian Painting* Bernard Smith claims the 'Social Realists' insistence on a political role for art caused the eventual split in the Contemporary Art Society. These people were in their early or mid twenties, and their work was fresh, talented and convincing. One should look for divergences in the art itself, rather than in the polemics of 'Angry Penguins' to which poets and critics added their weight. One should also consider the social background of the various groupings which affect their aesthetic and ideological partisanship.

I think the survival of figurative painting in Melbourne as a strong tradition able to withstand the onslaught of abstract expressionism in the 1950s and 1960s was largely due to the existence here of figurative work which went far deeper than nostalgic myth (as resurrected by the Antipodean Group in the late 1950s).

The Antipodean Manifesto specifically excludes 'social realism' from its credo. That was a typical 'cold war' reaction at the time. Why did a small movement which was ignored by the pundits need to be named in this way? Because the work itself was challenging! Without any highly placed backers, media or critical support, somehow they managed to survive with regular group showings

outside the big gallery network. But the media was not kind at all. It became fashionable to deride 'social realism' in this time of great affluence.

During the whole onslaught of abstract expressionism in the 1950s and 1960s, and even in the late 1940s, there was much misrepresentation of the 'realist' position. I think this added to the distorted arguments against 'so called figuration'. (For quite a period A. McCulloch was practically the only leading critic to stay independent of this line. Later Bernard Smith joined the defensive with the 'Antipodean' idea.

The realists - because many happened also to be communists - were dubbed as crude 'cartoonists' and tractor-brigade illustrators, as a way of dismissing their work. That was unfair, as any study of their work will prove. Actually they regarded Mexican art as an immediate source rather than Soviet art, and admired Daumier, Goya, Breughel and other earlier streams of European humanism as the tradition that could extend into the present.

So, based on a wide concept of sources of social orientation, their numbers included a great variety of talents: the poetic, the lyrical, the pragmatic, the feminist, and so on.

In all these years this was the real underground stream of Australian art, and, as it predated the women's liberation movement, a woman within the stream felt added frustration.

I was state secretary of the Union of Australian Women from about 1949 to 1953, and after 1955 was teaching fulltime, organising the International Child Art Exchange, and active in left-wing movements generally.

But as I indicated earlier, while people's lives are fragmented into sections by various commitments, there is still the whole personality, the whole direction taken, which shows up years later.

ADVICE TO ONESELF (II)

*Well then, yes think of happy things,
Times ahead, or sunny days
When morning lit the ocean floor,
Smooth sand way down, every tiny form
In hushed and glassy thrall -
Pearly powder-blue days
Yeast buns fresh from the bakery
And tennis after school.
If it was perfect then
Why not again?
Wilfully recklessly
I'll spin a dream
To enfold, implore, corrupt, restore...
Can fantasy beget reality? No,
Not any more.
So, be happy this very day!
Certain things planned, done,
Three fine meals,
Music filled an hour,
Also, a daughter sewing,
A son secretly smiling -
Then unexpectedly a stormy sunset
And wave-lashed sea.*

(no date)

Study for relief of nude