

# Imaging a Nation: Australia's Representation at the Venice Biennale, 1958

**Sarah Scott**

In 1937 Robert Menzies, then Australian attorney-general,<sup>1</sup> declared that he found 'nothing but absurdity in much so-called modern art with its evasion of real problems and its cross eyed drawing'.<sup>2</sup> He believed that art 'ought to be understood by reasonably cultivated people who are not themselves artists'.<sup>3</sup> These views were expressed during the much publicised disputes generated by his proposal to establish an Australian Academy of Art in 1937. Historians have argued that once this academy collapsed in 1946, the 'conservative old guard' of which Menzies was a part 'lost all power and influence'.<sup>4</sup> However, due to the government's monopoly over artwork selection for official overseas exhibitions,<sup>5</sup> Menzies's views on art continued to have a profound impact upon Australia's modernist artists following his second appointment as prime minister in 1949. In 1958, twenty years after the initial academy disputes, the issue of Australia's first official representation at the Venice Biennale caused a second split between modernists and conservatives.<sup>6</sup> The consequences of the conflict were so profound that Australia rejected an invitation to exhibit at the 1960 biennale and did not show in Venice again until 1978. Australia's twenty-year absence from the world's premier exhibition of international art had deep ramifications for the nation's artists: divisions emerged between the values espoused by art of the nationally based Heidelberg school and art more closely aligned with European modernism. Ultimately, the debate centred on the cultural presentation of the nation through art.

## **The Menzies art regime**

The Commonwealth Arts Advisory Board (hereafter abbreviated to the CAAB) was a committee formed in 1911 to advise the then Prime Minister Andrew Fisher concerning 'Votes for Historical memorials for representative men'.<sup>7</sup> In 1912 it began to advise the government concerning suitable artists for portrait commissions of prime ministers and other outstanding Australians, as well as artworks recording national events such as the opening of the first Commonwealth parliament in Canberra in 1927.<sup>8</sup> Later, the board assumed responsibility for choosing works for the National Collection.<sup>9</sup> It was disbanded in 1972 when the Whitlam Government came to power.<sup>10</sup>

The CAAB consisted of members drawn from a narrow range of aesthetic backgrounds, the majority of whom held or had held powerful and influential positions as artistic directors and/or teachers. They included social portraitist and art teacher William Dargie; watercolourist Douglas Pratt; former director of the National Gallery of Victoria and watercolourist Daryl Lindsay; director of the Art Gallery of South Australia and watercolourist Robert Campbell; and, finally, the chairman of the board, Sir William Ashton.<sup>11</sup> Ashton first became a member in

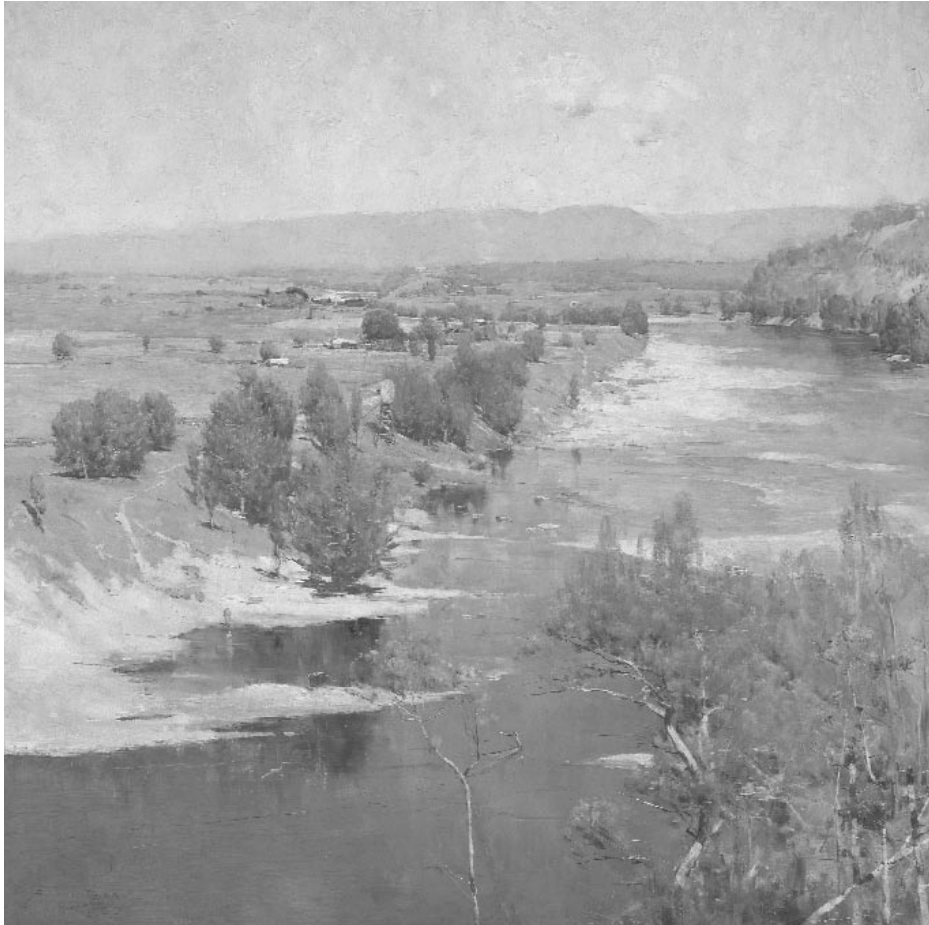
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1918, inheriting the position his father held before him. By 1958 he was still, as Bernard Smith observes in *Australian Painting*, 'a sturdy and influential opponent of post-Cezannist movements in this country'.<sup>12</sup> Menzies personally appointed the majority of the members of the CAAB to their honorary positions in 1953. He also had power of veto over the board's decisions. His influence became particularly significant during the late 1950s, when the expanded powers of the CAAB gave the body complete monopoly over the official selection of Australian art for export: from 1955 it was responsible for choosing works for embassies as well as for the export of artworks for official exhibitions of Australian art overseas.<sup>13</sup> The influence of Menzies's artistic preferences and conception of a national aesthetic had a profound effect upon the construction of nation within overseas exhibitions of Australian art as well as limiting the opportunities available for contemporary Australian artists to exhibit abroad.

However, Menzies's vision for an Australian Academy of Art was not fully realised. The academy proposal caused such division among the Australian arts community that the organisation disbanded in 1946 due to lack of support.<sup>14</sup> Nonetheless, the ideas espoused by Menzies and the 'hard core' advocates of the academy continued to influence views concerning the nature of an Australian art tradition. The anti-modernism stance of art critic and artist Lionel Lindsay, as well as those of former director of the Art Gallery of New South Wales and the National Gallery of Victoria J S McDonald, attracted significant support from advocates of the Australian Academy of Art. R H Croll, for example, wrote to Lionel Lindsay lamenting 'the bright young things of the studios boast that their works reflect their minds. By God they do! ... they blaspheme the Olympians — the Streetons and the Lamberts, and sacrifice filth upon the alters of the new gods they serve'.<sup>15</sup> The academy reinforced the position of the Heidelberg landscape tradition as the representative national art form.<sup>16</sup> The idealised works produced under this banner were seen as representing an essential 'Australianness' depicted through pastoral arcadian landscapes and iconic figures such as shearers and settlers.<sup>17</sup>

From the 1920s to the 1940s, Arthur Streeton's works were promoted as both perfect examples of fine art and as a 'true' vision of the Australian nation.<sup>18</sup> Nancy Underhill has observed: 'As an undefined term it [Heidelberg] became an easy synonym for just about anything considered admirable in Australian art'.<sup>19</sup> The Heidelberg tradition of idyllic pastoral scenes and paintings valorising work and pioneering has parallels in aesthetic movements from other countries. A similar rhetoric can be seen in the folkloric revivals and nostalgia for landscape found in fascist Europe during the 1940s.<sup>20</sup> Germany's far right viewed art as the expression of a racially pure culture and as a means to unite a community. Art was linked with the 'true' values of country, health and a type of 'blood and soil' nationalism or, in Hitler's terms, a spirit of 'Volk'.<sup>21</sup> An extreme manifestation of these right-wing ideals within Australia was to be found in the book *Addled Art* (1942) by art critic and personal friend of Menzies, Lionel Lindsay. *Addled Art* argues that the pure traditions of Australian painting, represented by 'Streeton, Roberts, Lambert and Heysen' were vulnerable to attack from 'the same aliens, the same corrupting influences that undermined French art, both supported by powerful propaganda ... forced on to a defenceless public'.<sup>22</sup> This rhetoric was taken up by Menzies, who confessed in a 1946 letter to Lindsay that 'he had

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Arthur Streeton (1867–1943, worked in Great Britain 1897–1919, Australia),  
*The Purple Noon's Transparent Might*, 1896.  
Oil on canvas, 123.0 x 123.0 cm, purchased 1896.  
Image courtesy of the National Gallery of Victoria.

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recently re-read *Addled Art* with supreme joy' before launching into an *Addled Art*-influenced description of his visit to see the recent Archibald Prize exhibition. 'I was almost convulsed with mirth', Menzies noted:

I would regard 90% of the artists as rank impostors: some of the refugees who have discovered the art racket since their arrival in Australia and who have become executants without first becoming students ... a portrait of the artist's mother done by some victim of oppression from middle Europe. What an astonishing old dame she must be, with one eye distended like that of Cyclops and the other scarcely fitting on the same plane, narrowed to a mere slit.<sup>23</sup>

Menzies's florid prose exaggerates the degree of distortion evident in Sali Herman's portrait of his mother.<sup>24</sup> In contrast, left-wing critic and art historian Bernard Smith's review of the Archibald Prize show identifies the portrait as 'one of the most distinguished paintings in the exhibition' leaving 'an impression of impeccable taste and simple finality'.<sup>25</sup>

Menzies's role in the defence of the traditional Heidelberg school of painting should not be simply dismissed as racist; rather, it can be seen as an attempt to preserve the 'right' of the middle class to view artworks that are 'accessible' and 'easily comprehensible'. After all, the middle classes (whom Menzies defined as 'The forgotten people' in his speech of 1942) were his main supporters.<sup>26</sup> The Heidelberg vision of the bush and country as the origin of the 'true Australian' and as representative of 'real values' appealed to the ever-increasing urban middle class. Paintings such as Streeton's *Australia Felix* (1907) and, more blatantly, McCubbin's *Pioneer Triptych* (1903) presented a story of roots and legitimation, and an image that was seen as defining the Australian character.<sup>27</sup> Suburban families flocked to see the immensely popular exhibitions of Sir Arthur Streeton and the Heidelberg school. The Streeton exhibition held at the National Gallery of Victoria in Melbourne during 1943–44 attracted 50,000 people over seven weeks; 9,500 catalogues were sold, 'a record for the gallery', and 3,170 catalogues were distributed to schools.<sup>28</sup> This mass support for the famous Heidelberg school artists does not necessarily indicate popular concurrence with Menzies's view of art in Australia. Attempts made to institutionalise the Heidelberg school as Australia's only legitimate art tradition within the academy were resisted by a significant group of modernist artists and their supporters.

### **Scenes of resistance**

Opposition to Menzies, his academy and the conservative ideas espoused by J S McDonald and Lionel Lindsay was not clear-cut.<sup>29</sup> Nevertheless, one can identify a split between those conservatives who saw Australian art as a tradition to be protected against international influence and those who felt that 'more than anything else at the present time, Australian artists and the Australian people need to see the good work of artists of other countries'.<sup>30</sup> This latter group centred on the Australian Contemporary Art Society (henceforth CAS).<sup>31</sup> The CAS began in Victoria in 1938 under the presidency of George Bell, and was formed in reaction to the foundation of the Australian Academy of Art in 1937.<sup>32</sup> Bell feared that 'any official project dealing with art, federal, state or municipal would necessarily be considered in the light of those officially representing the Royal Academy

council'.<sup>33</sup> The fact that many of the academicians, including W B McInnes, Max Meldrum and John Longstaff, were personal friends of Menzies did nothing to allay Bell's fears.

Menzies's longstanding opponent, H V Evatt,<sup>34</sup> became a significant ally of the CAS and George Bell. Far from believing, as Menzies did, in an Australian national tradition that should be protected from the contamination of outside influence, Evatt encouraged the society's endeavour to make international connections, to show works from overseas within Australia and to export Australian works overseas. In his opening speech at Adrian Lawlor's exhibition in June 1936, Evatt commented that 'Australia lagged far behind the standard of art in England, America and Europe' because 'our national galleries are controlled by men who suffer from an intense abhorrence of anything that has been done since 1880'.<sup>35</sup> H V Evatt and his wife Alice May were active participants within the Australian liberal modernist movement. Alice attended Sydney's modernist-inspired Rah Fizelle School and was also the only woman on the board of trustees at the National Gallery of New South Wales when she was appointed in 1943. Alice also wrote an article for the *Woman's Weekly* in which she praised Picasso's paintings. She concluded by lamenting that Australian art was too much devoted to 'gum trees, sheep, koalas, misty impressionism, seascapes and supposedly academic colour photography'.<sup>36</sup>

H V Evatt not only attended the openings of modernist artists but was also an active supporter of the CAS, giving the opening speeches for inaugural exhibitions held in 1939 and at the relaunch of the society in 1953. Evatt's interest concerning Australia's place within international affairs was consolidated when he became president of The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) in 1948. He and fellow Australian Peter Bellew were instrumental in organising Sidney Nolan's first overseas exhibition, which was held at UNESCO in Paris during 1948. Evatt's speech at the launch of the CAS, in which he expressed his fear that the academy would 'foster a spirit of exclusiveness and of commercial monopoly very damaging to individual artists and well calculated to obstruct the spread of modern culture in Australia',<sup>37</sup> was not simply political sparring with Menzies. Evatt's comment reflected the genuine concern of a politician and individual deeply involved with a modernist arts community.

Emerging from the disputes surrounding the academy and its supporters were two fundamentally different visions of an Australian art and its role within an international art scene. Despite internal political divisions, members of the CAS were united in their belief that Australian artists should engage with overseas art. H V Evatt endorsed this view, which is most clearly articulated in both the methodology and content of Bernard Smith's *Place, Taste and Tradition*, published in 1946.<sup>38</sup> Smith, contemporary artists such as Adrian Lawlor and George Bell and, later, radical painters such as Albert Tucker argued that Australian painting should not be restricted by the pastoral landscape tradition. From their point of view, artists who drew upon 'European' modernist ideas produced art that was both uniquely Australian and engaged with the rest of the world. Although members of the CAS were not united in their beliefs concerning the artist's role within society, all factions resisted the idea that only the academy-trained artist could be considered a professional. By contrast, Menzies and his

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supporters advocated academy-trained artists and harked back to the pastoral traditions of the Heidelberg school as the foundation upon which Australian painting should be built.

### The Venice Biennale

The conflicts between supporters of a conservative nationalist vision of art versus supporters of an international, contemporary view were rekindled by the issue of Australian representation at the Venice Biennale of 1958. At this point, Venice was the primary venue for the display of international contemporary art.<sup>39</sup> The 1958 Venice Biennale presented a diverse range of contemporary art practice from every part of the globe. Venice was not simply a site of display; it was a forum that helped to determine the hierarchy of artists included in accounts of twentieth-century art history itself. In this forum, *art brut* and *art informel* battled for supremacy against American pop art, while abstract expressionism countered social realism. Bernard Smith described the biennale as 'the most important international exhibition in the world. It gathers an audience of informed critical opinion, and is reviewed in art and literary publications the world over'.<sup>40</sup> Despite the undeniable centrality of the Venice Biennale in determining national art histories and their subsequent place within the art history canon, the 1958 biennale was the one and only time that Australia was given complete official representation before 1978.<sup>41</sup> The 1958 event was not a success. The CAAB insisted upon the paintings of Sir Arthur Streeton as Australia's major contribution, supported by a selection of landscapes by Arthur Boyd.<sup>42</sup> Needless to say, the CAS was profoundly distressed by the conservatism of this selection:

The society wishes to express to you that it is not in agreement with the policy and selection made by the Australian National Fine Arts Advisory board and does not feel that Australia will thus be adequately represented. It is of the opinion that several artists should have been selected as a group which would be able to show the varying latest developments in serious creative painting in this country.<sup>43</sup>

This dispute was made particularly bitter by the fact that it was the CAS that had, after long and protracted negotiation, secured the invitation to exhibit at the biennale.<sup>44</sup>

The achievement of Australian representation at the 1958 biennale was the product of many years' work.<sup>45</sup> Bernard Smith wrote that the biennale 'stimulated the desire in Australian art circles that Australian artists should be exhibited in international company and submitted to international standards'.<sup>46</sup> These concerns, alongside the influence of Australian migrant CAS members, contributed toward this society's desire to participate within the international art world. The Parisian couple Georges and Mirka Mora<sup>47</sup> and the Italian Gino Nibbi<sup>48</sup> played crucial roles within the campaign to send contemporary Australian art overseas. At a presidential speech given by Georges Mora at a CAS meeting in 1957 he argued that:

We must break down this prejudice in the world that Australia is an artistically backward country. There is only one solution: that is, the pushing of Australian artistic achievements into the world and to bring the world's artistic achievements into this country.<sup>49</sup>

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The CAS attempted to forge links with America, Japan, Germany, France, England and Italy and established a Museum of Modern Art in Melbourne to encourage cultural interchange between nations.<sup>50</sup> An important part of the CAS's campaign to increase Australia's links with the international art scene was their push for Australia to be represented at Venice. However, their efforts were continually frustrated.

A 1955 letter written by George Mora urging Australian participation at the 1956 biennale sent to R G Casey, the minister for external affairs in the Menzies Government, was ignored.<sup>51</sup> After further enquiries, the society received a letter informing them that Casey was on holiday and then that the government had decided not to participate. Efforts to be represented at the 1958 biennale were redoubled in 1957. Gino Nibbi visited the general secretary of the Venice Biennale, Mr Rudolf Pallucchini, on behalf of the CAS. Nibbi was unable to secure the CAS's right to select artworks for exhibition. Biennale rules required that nations represented be officially supported by their respective governments. Venice Biennale secretary R Pallucchini explained to Nibbi that the:

Biennale is a government institution, and it is its practice to issue invitations to all the nations of the world, through their local embassies or legations, and not to the various artistic associations as such.<sup>52</sup>

Nevertheless, both the Australian ambassador in Rome, Paul McGuire,<sup>53</sup> and the secretary of the biennale, Rudolf Pallucchini, assumed that the CAS would continue to be primarily responsible for selection.<sup>54</sup> Following the CAAB's receipt of the biennale invitation, Mora wrote to the board advising that 'nothing would be more fatal, we feel, for the prestige of an advancing Australia in the field of culture than to send a mediocre and conventional show in Venice'. In a letter written directly to the prime minister, Mora reiterates the importance of the biennale, concluding that the CAS's 'close contact with the great majority of contemporary Australian artists is readily at the service of your government'.<sup>55</sup> Despite the efforts of the CAS, Gino Nibbi and George Mora, the CAAB insisted upon maintaining a complete monopoly over the selection process. They chose fourteen Stree-ton landscapes and eight early Boyd landscapes to represent Australian painters at the 1958 Venice Biennale.<sup>56</sup> Works included *Irrigation Lake* (1950) by Arthur Boyd and *Golden Summer* (1888), *The Hot Road* (1896, belonging to R G Menzies), *Australia Felix* (1907), *Near Heidelberg* (1890) and *The Purple Noon's Transparent Might* (1896) by Stree-ton.

Lionel Lindsay was selected to write the section on Stree-ton in the Venice Biennale catalogue — an unsurprising choice. Lindsay's introduction claimed that Stree-ton's *Golden Summer* was a 'sheer feat of genius'.<sup>57</sup> He described Arthur Stree-ton as one of the 'native born', a fact that enabled him to come to terms with the 'alien' and 'primitive' landscape of Australia. He argued that the work of Stree-ton, McCubbin, Tom Roberts and Charles Conder represented 'the finest art Australia has yet produced' and Stree-ton himself was 'easily the first and greatest painter of the Australian landscape'.<sup>58</sup> While Robert Campbell, the other contributor to the catalogue, acknowledges Arthur Boyd's 'remarkable series of biblical paintings',<sup>59</sup> Boyd is merely noted as a painter of representational Australian landscapes. None of the profound and powerful works of the 1940s, such as the controversial *Shearers Playing for a Bride* (1957) and *Half-Caste*

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*Child* (1957), were chosen. These disturbing images did not present the positive image of nation that Menzies and the board felt to be appropriate for an overseas audience. William Ashton resisted the inclusion of contemporary figurative painter Robert Dickerson as a possible representative for the 1960 biennale because 'His figures look like moronic monsters ... and I can imagine people saying Australians are like these'.<sup>60</sup> Instead, the work of Arthur Boyd was shown to be drawing upon the traditions established by Sir Arthur Streeton. Campbell argues that Boyd's landscapes reveal that 'the period of grandeur' epitomised in Streeton's work 'has passed', to be replaced with 'an awareness, no less significant, of the more intimate aspects of the Australian landscape'. He concludes by stressing once more the pre-eminence of Sir Arthur Streeton, for his 'technical brilliancy has never been equalled in this country'.<sup>61</sup> The press release, written by Robert Campbell, also emphasised Sir Arthur Streeton's prestige. Only a quarter of the press release is devoted to Arthur Boyd, who is described as a young artist with a 'naive, yet naturalistic approach' all his own.<sup>62</sup> The Venice Biennale selection and the accompanying catalogue thus reiterated the aesthetic and moral values of the conservative establishment in power before the second world war.

The effect that Streeton's landscapes had within the context of the 1958 Venice Biennale exposition can be appreciated by listing some of the other artworks displayed that year. America's pavilion featured the paintings of Mark Rothko alongside a panorama of thirty-four other artists, while in the British pavilion painters S W Hayter and William Scott were displayed with the work of sculptor Kenneth Armitage.<sup>63</sup> The paintings of William Scott and Mark Rothko, in particular, marked a dismissal of representative forms of arts practice. In juxtaposition with such work, the Australian selection choice attracted damning criticism. A report by the former Australian ambassador at the time of the 1958 Venice Biennale concluded that 'it was felt that the exclusion of avant-garde artists gave an impression of backwardness and unflattering comparisons were made between Australia and the Soviet pavilions'.<sup>64</sup>

### **Representing a modern nation**

Despite the failure of the 1958 selection, the CAAB did consider the possibility of Australia's representation at the Venice Biennale of 1960. However, board member William Dargie feared that:

just as the Boyds look hopelessly old fashioned (and to be lumped with the Streetons), so the Drysdals, Nolans, Dobells, Bracks and Carington-Smiths would be equally useless for the purpose.<sup>65</sup>

He further claimed that 'the sort of art which is represented here is simply not done at all in Australia to my knowledge'.<sup>66</sup> His statements fail to acknowledge the activities of a burgeoning Australian contemporary art scene. John Howley's *City Force* (1956) and John Olsen's *View of the Western World* (1956) had already been exhibited overseas in the Pacific Loan exhibition of 1956.<sup>67</sup> In Sydney, the NSW branch of the CAS provided a nucleus for contemporary artists experimenting with abstract modes. Elwyn Lynn's editorship of the society's newsletter *Broadsheet* kept members informed of developments in Europe and





Arthur Boyd (1920–1999 Australia), *Irrigation lake, Wimmera*, 1950.  
Resin and temera on composition board, 81,4 x 121.9 cm, purchased 1950.  
Arthur Boyd's work reproduced with the permission of the Bundanoon trust, courtesy of the National Gallery of Victoria.

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America, and encouraged them to see their own work as part of an international community.<sup>68</sup> The *Sydney Morning Herald* review of the 1956 CAS of NSW annual exhibition comments upon a diverse range of abstractionists, many of them called 'New Australians'.<sup>69</sup> The year was also marked by the landmark show *Direction 1* at Macquarie Galleries, which included works by the painters John Passmore, John Olsen, William Rose, Eric Smith and by the sculptor Robert Klippel.<sup>70</sup>

The decision that Australia should not be represented at the 1960 Venice Biennale at all was finally made by Menzies himself at a meeting with the CAAB secretary in late 1959. 'Obviously', the Prime Minister observed, the biennale was 'run by crack pots'.<sup>71</sup> Menzies understood that the biennale was a platform for nationalist aspirations and for establishing the canon of each respective country's art. He argued that he was:

Against sending art abroad of modernistic stuff that meant nothing and was, in many cases, painted by New Australians like Michael Kmit. This is not Australian art. It could have been painted anywhere.<sup>72</sup>

In an age dominated by the white Australia policy, the idea that an artist who emerged from a background outside Britain or Australia could represent Australia overseas was felt to be deeply undesirable. Twenty years after his visit to the Archibald Prize exhibition, when he had sneered at the modernist work done by Kmit whom he described as 'some victim of European oppression',<sup>73</sup> the prime minister was still strongly attached to an image of Anglo-Australia.

The efforts of a prime minister to influence the course of Australian art through the contested academy, and to become active in debate about the artistic representation of Australia overseas through the CAAB, is testament to the ways in which art can narrate national identity. In this context, one of the values of paintings in the tradition of the Heidelberg school was their tendency to depict the presence of 'whites' in Australia as naturalised. The nationalist ideology of the 'pre-war conservative old guard' continued to influence Australia's global self-representation during the 1950s and early 1960s. This situation endured despite both CAS protests and international derision, such as the criticisms of 'backwardness' levelled at the Australian exhibition at the 1958 Venice Biennale.

Menzies believed that 'extreme forms of modernistic art',<sup>74</sup> by which he meant abstract art, had no identifiable source of national origin. This view became the foundation stone for his case against Australian participation at the biennale. However, the belief that abstract art would be perceived as anonymous and international with no distinct national flavour was profoundly mistaken. As British art critic Lawrence Alloway notes, the art presented in the Spanish pavilion, including the work of Antoni Tapies and other *art autre* artists, had a distinct national character, even though it had been influenced by the work of Jean Dubuffet and Lucio Fontana.<sup>75</sup> Similarly, critics aligned American abstract expressionism with American culture.<sup>76</sup> Abstract expressionism's use of vibrant colours and daring expressionism became part of an ideology in which creative freedom was associated with the freedom of the west and the American dream.<sup>77</sup>

There was an outcry among Australian contemporary art supporters against the CAAB's decision not to support Australia's representation at the 1960 Venice Biennale. The Australian ambassador in Rome, H A McClure Smith, was horrified

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at the CAAB's rejection of the biennale invitation. By this point he had completed a series of negotiations with the biennale authorities resulting in the reservation of a space for the Australian selection.<sup>78</sup> McClure Smith only became aware of the CAAB's decision after coming across a report in the Radio Australia news.<sup>79</sup> In a strongly worded letter to the board, he warns not only of the 'embarrassing position *vis-a-vis* the biennale authorities' but also points out that:

The decision itself will leave us 'odd man out' so far as the commonwealth is concerned as well as probably the only country with a vigorous contemporary school of artists that will be absent from the biennale ... In Italy particularly, where countries are perhaps judged more by their cultural standards than is the case in many parts of the world, the effect upon our prestige can hardly be other than deplorable.<sup>80</sup>

Menzies and his government did not realise the potential of modern art to promote a positive image of nation. In America, art had become part of the Kennedy 'frontier of culture' in which culture and its sustenance were viewed as essential components of a healthy society.<sup>81</sup> In 1962 Senator J Javits declared that 'the visual and performing arts are not a luxury but a necessity in the defence of our free society against the backdrop of Cold War'.<sup>82</sup> In Britain, the establishment of the British Council in 1936 provided a support basis for artists who wished to be exhibited overseas. Representation at the biennale was the jewel in the crown of a carefully planned strategy to promote British art abroad.<sup>83</sup>

In contrast to the CAAB's intentional isolationist approach, Australia's contemporary art community, as represented by CAS, supported active participation and exchange within an international arena. While many CAS migrant members sought to maintain strong connections with European artists and curators, the CAAB consistently ignored the majority of international requests for Australian representation post-1958. In Australia, contemporary artists and their supporters continued to campaign for representation at the Venice Biennale for over two decades.<sup>84</sup> It was not until 1978 that Australia was finally represented at the biennale under the auspices of the Australian Arts Council.<sup>85</sup>

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- 1 Robert Menzies (1894–1978): Attorney-General 1932–1939, Prime Minister 1939–1941, Opposition leader 1943–1949, Prime Minister 1949–1966.
- 2 R Menzies, 'A reply to artist Norman McGeorge', *Argus*, 3 May, 1937.
- 3 *ibid.*
- 4 See R Haese, *Rebels and Precursors*, Penguin, Ringwood, Victoria, 1988, p 55; J F Williams, *The Quarantined Culture: Australian Reactions to Modernism 1913–1939*, Cambridge University Press, Melbourne, 1995, p 247.
- 5 'Official' events such as the Venice Biennale and the Sao Paulo Biennale used art as a means to showcase each participating nation. Nations depended upon some government sponsorship. This contrasted with unofficial, privately sponsored and funded exhibitions.

## Notes to pp 53–54

- 6 Australia's involvement with the Venice Biennale began in 1954 when Sidney Nolan, William Dobell and Russell Drysdale were invited by the president of the Biennale to present their work in the Centra Palazzo. Menzies approved partial government funding for this but the exhibit was primarily organised by the British Arts Council. Three works from Sidney Nolan's *Ned Kelly* series alongside *Aubury Station* by Russell Drysdale were represented (*La Biennale di Venezia XVII*, Venice 1954, pp 190–5). In 1956 Albert Tucker, who was then resident in Rome, was also invited to take part, but on neither of these occasions was Australia fully represented as an independent participating nation.
- 7 A McCulloch, revised and updated by S McCulloch, *Encyclopaedia of Australian Art*, University of Hawaii Press, Honolulu, 1994, p 173.
- 8 *ibid.*
- 9 *ibid.*
- 10 See L Barrett, *The Prime Minister's Christmas Card: Blue Poles and Cultural Politics in the Whitlam Era*, Power Publications, Sydney, 2001; K Johanson, *The Role of Australia's Cultural Council*, unpublished PhD thesis, Department of History and Science, University of Melbourne, 2000 and J Macdonnell, *Arts, Minister?: Government Policy and the Arts*, Currency Press, Sydney, 1992.
- 11 See McCulloch, *op. cit.*
- 12 B Smith, *Australian Painting*, Oxford University Press, London, 1962, p 163.
- 13 *ibid.*
- 14 Haese *op. cit.*, p 49. Menzies failed to secure a Royal charter for the academy in 1938 because of the lack of united support from the artistic community. The standard of the annual academy exhibitions was felt by art publisher and patron Sidney Ure Smith to be lower than that of the Sydney Society of artists. See R Haese, *ibid.*, p 45. The formation of the CAS in 1938 further challenged the academy. Plans for the institution were interrupted by the second world war and in 1946 it collapsed altogether.
- 15 Croll to Lindsay 15 September 1942, Lindsay papers, MS9104, State Library of Victoria (SLV). Founding members of the Australian Academy and supporters of J S Macdonald's ideas included Hans Heysen, W B McInnes, R H Croll, R G Menzies and Harold Herbert.
- 16 For discussion of the relationship between National Identity and the 'Heidelberg School' see I Burn, *National Life and Landscapes: Australian Painting 1900–1940*, Bay Books, Sydney, 1990; R White, *Inventing Australia: Images and Identity 1688–1980*, George Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 1981; J F Williams, *op. cit.*; N Underhill, *Making Australian Art: Sydney Ure Smith Patron and Publisher, 1916–1949*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1991, p 109; R Haese, *Rebels and Precursors*, *op. cit.*; I MacLean, *White Aborigines*, Cambridge University Press, New York, 1998.
- 17 The 'Heidelberg school' originally referred to a series of en plein air artist camps held in the Melbourne bush suburbs of Eaglemont, Box Hill and Mentone beginning in 1885. Artists included Tom Roberts, Frederick McCubbin, Louis Abrahams and, later, Arthur Streeton and Charles Conder. After the first world war, the term was used more generally to refer to a pastoral, en plein air style of painting. See also Jane Clark and Bridgete Whitelaw, *Golden Summers: Heidelberg and Beyond*, International Cultural Corporation of Australia, Sydney, 1985; McCulloch, *op. cit.*
- 18 Moore claims that 'Gruner, Hilder and all our native born artists who accept their nationality and develop it along with metaphysical Australian light provide the basis for Australia's contribution to world art'. See W Moore, *The Story of Australian Art*, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1934. See also R H Croll's *Smike to Bulldog, Letters of Streeton to Roberts*, Ure Smith, Sydney, 1946; *Art in Australia*, Ure Smith, Sydney, October 1931.
- 19 Underhill, *op. cit.*, p 109.
- 20 See B Hinz, *Art In The Third Reich* (translated from German by Robert and Rita Kimber), Pantheon Books, New York, 1979; P Adams, *The Arts of the Third Reich*, Harry N Abrams, New York, 1992; I Golomstock, *Totalitarian Art*, Collins, Harvill, London, 1990, p 218.
- 21 *ibid.*
- 22 L Lindsay, *Addled Art*, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1942, p ix.
- 23 R Menzies to L Lindsay, 26 February, 1946, Lindsay Papers, MS 9104/1610, Box 2001, SLV, Melbourne.
- 24 D Thomas, *Sali Herman*, Georgian House, Melbourne, 1962.

- 25 B Smith, 'Art Chronicle', *Meanjin*, Melbourne University Press, Autumn 1946, p 48.
- 26 See J Brett, *Robert Menzies' Forgotten People*, Pan Macmillan, Sydney, 1993, pp 5–12 for an analysis of Robert Menzies' 'Forgotten People' speech broadcast on the radio in 1942.
- 27 J Murphy, 'The Pursuit of Private Happiness', *Imagining The Fifties: Private Sentiment and Political Culture in Menzies' Australia*, University of New South Wales Press, Sydney, 2000.
- 28 Minutes of the NGV trustees 1944, NGV archives, Melbourne.
- 29 As Haese points out, 'support for the Academy idea came from two positions. The first was a conservative one, for which Menzies was chief spokesman. The second was a more liberal position exemplified by Ure Smith'. R Haese, op. cit., p 40.
- 30 H Adam, 'Should there be an Academy of Australian Art?', *Herald*, June, 1937, p 7, George Bell papers 1914–1966, papers relating to the Australian Academy of Arts controversy, MS 12700, SLV.
- 31 The CAS later split into three distinct groups: the avant-garde artists supported by the Reeds; the social realist artists; and George Bell and his supporters. See R Haese op. cit., pp 46–50, 59–93.
- 32 Adam, op. cit.
- 33 G Bell 'To Art Lovers', George Bell papers 1914–1966, 'Papers relating to the Australian Academy of Arts Controversy', MS 12700, SLV.
- 34 HV Evatt (1894–1965) 1941–49 Attorney General and Minister for External affairs, UN delegate, 1950–1960 Leader of the Labor party in opposition, 1960–2 Victorian Chief Justice.
- 35 *Argus*, 3 June, 1936.
- 36 M Evatt, *Australian Women's Weekly*, 28 January, 1949 cited in J F Williams, op. cit., p 217.
- 37 *Age*, 7 June 1939, cited in D C McNeill, *A History of the Contemporary Art Society of Melbourne 1938–1947*, unpublished BA (Hons) thesis, University of Melbourne, 1976.
- 38 Smith describes the dominant tradition of the Heidelberg school as 'a national vice' (p 146) but also acknowledges the influence of Europeans Jules Bastien Lepage and Louis Buvelot upon this 'Australian' school (pp 178–9). B Smith, *Place, Taste and Tradition*, Ure Smith, Sydney, 1946.
- 39 In 1954 Sidney Nolan declared 'there is no such place in the world where art is enjoyed with such freedom and to such extent as in Venice'. (Sidney Nolan to Rudolfo Pallunchinni, 13 July, 1954, La Biennale di Venezia, ASAC, Fondo Archivio Storico, Serie Paesi, Box no 2, File 'XXVII Biennale Australia, 1954', (courtesy of Steve Naylor). See also L Alloway, *The Venice Biennale 1895–1968: From Salon to Goldfish Bowl*, New York Graphic Society, Greenwich, Connecticut, 1968, p 134.
- 40 Bernard Smith, Letter to the Editor, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 19 January, 1951.
- 41 Nolan, Dobell and Drysdale and later Tucker, had been invited to presented there as individual artists in 1954. See footnote 5.
- 42 *The XXIX Biennale Venice, 1958, Australian Paintings by Arthur Streeton, Arthur Boyd*, K M Stevenson, Government Printer, Adelaide, 1958.
- 43 See W Hawkins (CAS secretary) to R Palluncchini (Secretary of the Venice Biennale), 20 May, 1958, CAS correspondence 1954–8, MS 8246, SLV, Melbourne.
- 44 Although Nibbi failed to secure the CAS's sole right for selection, he did secure a promise from Palluncchini, General Secretary of the Venice Biennale, that an official invitation would be sent to the Commonwealth Arts Advisory Board (CAAB). See G Nibbi to G Mora, 8 May, 1957, Contemporary Art Society of Australia, Victorian branch, Correspondence 1954–58, MS 8246, SLV, Melbourne.
- 45 As early as the 1920s the Society of Artists led by Sidney Ure Smith made some queries regarding Australian representation at Venice, but to no avail. Following the second world war, renewed attempts were made by Elizabeth Fagiolli Griffiths (an Australian woman married to a trader in Italian goods). Fagiolli Griffiths wished Australia to be represented at the 1952 Venice Biennale with an exhibition including 'both the Australian school of art and the Aboriginal art'. She approached Dame Enid Lyons, the director of the Art Gallery of New South Wales, the editor and art critic of the *Sun* newspaper and the senior government trade commissioner at Australia House, London (E F Griffiths to the President of the Venice Biennale 7 August, 1951, courtesy of Steve Naylor, La Biennale di Venezia, ASAC, Fondo Archivio Storico, Serie Scatolene Padiglioni, box no 23, File 'Australia 1925–9').
- 46 B Smith, *Australian Painting*, op. cit.

*Notes to pp 58–62*

- 47 Arriving from Paris to Australia in 1951, Georges and Mirka Mora established the Mirka Gallery in Collins Street, Melbourne during 1953. It became the first headquarters for the revived Victorian CAS.
- 48 Gino Nibbi (1896–1969) opened Galleria di Quattro Venti in Rome after the second world war. Nolan and Tucker exhibited there with a joint show in 1953. Una serie di quadri ad olio del pittore Australiano Sidney Nolan gentilmente concessi da Mrs e Mr John Reed di Melbourne, Libreria Quattro Venti, Largo Giuseppe Toniolo, Rome, 17–30 October 1950: the Kelly paintings with introduction by Jean Cassou and Gino Nibbi. Nibbi had also established a bookshop in Melbourne which helped to stimulate modernist activity in Australia. It included art magazines from France such as *L'oeil*, and *Cahiers d'art*. Nibbi also owned collection of European modernist art including works by Giorgio de Chirico. Nolan and Tucker exhibited together in *Sidney Nolan and Albert Tucker*, International Press Club, Rome, May, 1954. See J Clark, op. cit., pp 15–28; R Haese, op. cit. p 15.
- 49 SLV, MS 8246 Contemporary Art Society of Australia; Victorian Branch, CAS meeting minutes, 29 August, 1957.
- 50 *ibid.*, CAS minutes, 13 January 1957.
- 51 G Mora to R G Casey, 10 May 1955, Contemporary Art Society of Australia, Victorian Branch, Correspondence 1954–1958, MS 8246, SLV.
- 52 G Nibbi to G Mora 8 May 1957, *ibid.*
- 53 Australian ambassador in Rome Paul McGuire advised that the society ‘must insist about our wish to go to Venice in view also of the fact that the Biennale management seems to be very keen about having our country represented there’ (*ibid.*).
- 54 *ibid.*
- 55 G Nibbi to G Mora forwarded to R Menzies, 23 May, 1957, *ibid.*
- 56 *The XXIX Biennale Venice, 1958, Australian paintings by Arthur Streeton, Arthur Boyd, K M Stevenson*, Government Printer, Adelaide, 1958, p 1.
- 57 *ibid.*
- 58 *ibid.*
- 59 *ibid.*
- 60 William Ashton to W R Cumming 31 July, 1959, CAAB files, A59/5000, National Archive of Australia (NAA).
- 61 *The XXIX Biennale Venice, 1958*, op. cit., p 4.
- 62 R Campbell, ‘Material for Press and Radio Release: Representation at the 1958 Venice Biennale’, CAAB records, A463/61, 58/1173, NAA.
- 63 S Bowness and C Phillpot (eds), *Britain at the Venice Biennale 1895–1995*, The British Council, London, 1995.
- 64 E J Bunting (secretary to the Prime Minister’s Department) to the secretary at the Department of External Affairs, CAAB files, 59/5000, NAA.
- 65 *ibid.* W Dargie Venice Biennale report cited in letter from E J Bunting to the Secretary of the Department of External Affairs.
- 66 *ibid.*
- 67 See C Heathcote, *A Quiet Revolution*, The Text Publishing Company, Melbourne, Victoria, 1995, p 52 for more on the Pacific Loan Exhibition.
- 68 See D Whitehouse, *The Contemporary Art Society of New South Wales and the Theory and Production of Contemporary Abstraction in Australia, 1947–1961*, unpublished doctoral thesis, Monash University, 1999, p 168.
- 69 See D Whitehouse, *ibid.*
- 70 *ibid.*
- 71 ‘Art Exhibitions Abroad’ initialed by W R Cumming, Meeting between Robert Menzies and Secretary of department of external affairs, 3 August, 1959, A463/61, 59/5000, CAAB files, NAA.
- 72 *ibid.*
- 73 R Menzies to L Lindsay, Lindsay papers, 26 February, 1946, MS 9104, SLV.
- 74 ‘Art Exhibitions Abroad’ initialed by W R Cumming, Meeting between Robert Menzies and Secretary of department of external affairs, 3 August, 1959, A463/61, 59/5000, CAAB files, NAA.
- 75 L Alloway, op. cit., p 143.

- 76 See S Guilbaut, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art: Abstract Expressionism, Freedom and the Cold War* (translated by A Goldhammer), University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1983; M Kozloff, 'American Painting During the Cold War', *Artforum* 13, May 1973, p 43–54; F K Pohl, 'An American in Venice: Ben Shahn and United State Foreign Policy at the 1954 Venice Biennale', *Art History*, vol 4, no 1, March 1981; L J Monahan 'Cultural Cartography: American Designs at the 1964 Venice Biennale' from *Reconstructing Modernism: Art in New York, Paris and Montreal 1945–64*, MIT Press, London, 1993.
- 77 *ibid.*
- 78 H A McClure-Smith, Australian ambassador in Rome to The CAAB, 28 May 1959. Copy to members of the board 16 July 1959, CAAB records, A463/61 59/5000, NAA.
- 79 Copy of *Radio Australia News*, London, 28 October, 1959, CAAB records, A463/61 59/5000, NAA.
- 80 H A McClure Smith to the Secretary of the Department of External Affairs, 2 November 1959, CAAB records, A463/61 59/5000, A 201/4/10/2 memorandum no 953, NAA.
- 81 See L J Monahan, 'Cultural Cartography: American designs at the 1964 Venice Biennale' from *Reconstructing Modernism: Art in New York, Paris and Montreal 1945–64*, MIT Press, London, 1993, p 375–7.
- 82 *ibid.*
- 83 It argued that British art's 'international stature is due to the talents of the artists themselves and to the recognition of these talents by the institutions concerned. The British Council Fine Arts Department has been merely the agent; but the success of this agency is success in performance of the department's chief function. British art is a national asset in the field of exports'. See British Council Archives, British Council Fine Arts Committee meetings 1956, BW78/3, National Archives, Kew, London. See also M Garlake, *New Art: New World. British Art in Postwar Society*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1998.
- 84 'The one way traffic of art out of Australia must be redressed and the PM should secure representation for Australia at the Venice Biennale in 1964 and Sao Paulo in 1965' (Conference of State Gallery Directors, minutes, 1962, CAAB records, A463 62/6682, NAA).
- 85 See J Davis, *Venice Biennale 1978, From Nature to Art, From Art To Nature: John Daws, Robert Owen, Ken Unsworth*, Sydney, Visual Arts Board, 1978.