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CONSTANCE STOKES 1906 - 1991

The current global engagement with both historic and contemporary women's art over the past decade and a quarter has well outlasted the 1970s' previous intense focus on women's art. Here is an ideal context in which to affirm Constance Stokes' major contribution to twentieth century Australian art. Her life and work is central to the history of Australian art and particularly the much- contested place and impact of women in that narrative.

She was a consistent technician, well trained, highly self-aware and alert in her commitment to formalism and neoclassicism, as the two interviews she gave to the National Library of Australia document.ⁱ Producing work of the highest possible standard was her goal and for some years of her career, especially when her children were young, she limited her output in order to maintain the standards that she set for herself. Yet concurrently her figure subjects were often warm, nuanced and sensitive in their characterisation. Without compromising the undeniable seriousness of Stokes' intent, her work, and particularly its subjects, also spoke eloquently to a broad audience and have continued to speak directly to the open-minded beyond the sometimes wavering fortunes of her art at the hands of institutional professionals since the 1960s.

Often linked historically and curatorially to the classical modernistsⁱⁱ in Australia, she was close to George Bell, but, as she made clear in interviews, never a pupil and he treated her as a professional colleague. Stokes' highly individual work tends to resist obvious alignment with that of sympathetic friends and colleagues. When set against that of other artists in her circle, Stokes' work is never as ironic or cynical as Dorothy Braund's, more consciously focussed on formal, even intellectual, outcomes than Sybil Craig's, and less romantic than Anne Montgomery's. Most notably her colour stands out as far bolder, cleaner and innovative than the work of many contemporaries and peers.

For Stokes, as recounted in interviews, the driving factors of her art were her imagination, her sense of design, and, increasingly at the end of her career, revisiting and reinterpreting her own previous works and studies. “Actually, most of my paintings are from imagination or memory.”ⁱⁱⁱ Women stand at the centre of her imagery, as she said, “the woman takes first place”.^{iv} Many of the works in this present collection reflect her preference for portraying women. Her female studies became particularly important during the later phase of her career, when she, in effect, rebuilt her practice and her confidence after the early death of her husband in 1962. At this date Stokes faced a very different and not always congenial artistic, social and political world to the one in which she first found fame. Her response to these changing times and practices was to heighten her colour and simplify her compositions.

On-Trend and Informed

Despite her dislike of contemporary art developments of the 1960s, “I have no sympathy with them at all” as she said of abstractionists^v, and wondering why artists disengaged themselves from the visual world, the closest resonance to her use of colour ironically would be the colourfield movement and the work of younger artists in Australia and overseas. Her interest in Matisse had already moved her beyond the early Picasso/Ecole de Paris influences that helped her break free of academic realism, but the parallels to the 1960s' explosion of colour in design and abstract art in Stokes' art lends it a unique potency. Colour was central to her practice in her later years and she delighted in developing complex

and striking combinations. To that end her drawings were as important as her oils, allowing both directness and freedom. In her insightful and finely drawn study of her mother's life Lucilla Wyborn D'Abrera singles out the pastels and wash drawings for special attention as the crystallisation of Stokes' vision and achievement.^{vi} In her later years Stokes' works on paper were never preparatory drafts, but fully rounded artworks in their own right where her technique and intention is eloquently revealed.

Stokes' keen preference to emphasise her personal autonomous thread of authority and professionalism partly obscures the complexity and acuity of her engagement with the visual culture of her era. Her reflections of the tangible world of taste and design in her art add a further layer of depth and sophistication to her work and demonstrate her keen observation of changing trends. Due to her husband's working association with manufacturing consumer goods and homewares in metal, Stokes had a strong knowledge of international contemporary design from the 1930s onwards. She and her husband patronised both a contemporary architect, Edward Fielder Bilson, designer of the family home, and the furniture designer Schulim Krimper.^{vii} Stokes' studies of women reveal her as aware of changing fashion and mores, especially in her later studies of women which share the power of 1960s and 1970s fashion photography, bold, confident, and formalist. The personae of her drawings share their combination of sass and imperiousness with photoshoots from fashion magazines of the era. Her daughter had invited Stokes to spend time in London in the early 1960s when the city was on the cusp of becoming the global trendsetter of popular culture, Stokes' notation of changing styles and gestures was direct, as well as mediated through print sources.

Felicity St John Moore observes that Stokes' later studies of women are often “passive”, “with their expressionless faces”, against rich and lively settings.^{viii} Yet that blankness of face against the complexity of pose and dress and the emphasis on the body (rather than the face) as a power in itself is a central element of international 1960s fashion photography, further emphasising Stokes' later works' links to contemporary visual trends. Concurrently the sources for the later images of women were high art as well as popular culture. As a woman artist Stokes' limpid mediation of the vision of woman driving both the Ecole de Paris and 1960s radical culture is provocative and important within national and global histories of twentieth century women's art. Moreover her choices of images and genres, frequently stereotypically linked to the authoritative male gaze, but effortlessly, even guilelessly, appropriated by Stokes, are curiously political, despite her own assertion of the formalist groundings of her art.

Whilst her figure studies are well known, Stokes' final oils of Wimmera landscapes are less familiar. They powerfully contradict stereotypes of Stokes' practice as often focussed upon pure design with synthesis and arrangement of imagined motifs, and thus aloof from the observed world. These works are extremely radical expressions of minimal, ethereal abstraction, in both the brevity of the forms and the shimmering delicacy of the pigments. Yet simultaneously they are deeply embedded in the colours, textures, vistas and light of the Wimmera. She had known and remembered this wide, even transcendental, terrain stretching to an equally wide horizon from her earliest childhood. With the assistance of her eldest son, who drove her out and set up basecamps, she revisited the Wimmera at the end of her life. The landscape is presented as elliptic and pared down, but concurrently as plausible and known.

Constance Stokes' Position in Australian Art History

Beyond her work, Stokes is important to the history of Australian art on a number of grounds. Firstly critics' and curators' high regard for her work from the 1930s to the 1960s is central to assessing women artists' impact on mainstream Australian art practice in the modernist and postwar period. Whilst interwar artists such as Clarice Beckett, Margaret Preston and Grace Cossington Smith have captured more academic and curatorial attention in recent years, ignoring Stokes' highly visible mid-century presence leaves a significant void in present day understandings of women artists' position in mid century Australia. Although she only showed in group exhibitions, art reviews of the 1940s and

1950s celebrated her as both an anomaly – a housewife and mother with a career – and a leading innovative artist. “Constance Stokes, a magnificent craftsman, ... an objective artist of a high order.”^{xix} She was included in major exhibitions that sought to “define” contemporary Australian art across the 1940s and 1950s including the 1941 Carnegie Corporation exhibition of Australian art in the United States, purchase by the Orient Line in 1950 as part of a collection of contemporary Australian art to decorate the Liner Oronsay, the Victorian Jubilee exhibition of 1951 touring regional Victoria by train, the exhibition of Australian contemporary art in London 1953, the 1953 Venice Biennale, the Second International Contemporary Art Exhibition in India, 1953 and the touring exhibition of Australian contemporary art selected by the directors of six Australian galleries in 1954. By the 1960s public collections across three states had purchased her work, and there were a steady series of acquisitions into the 1970s, including galleries in Queensland and the Northern Territory.

Secondly, although Stokes felt little sympathy with “feminist art” as practised in the 1970s and 1980s, she discussed the oppositional pulls of professional art, societal expectations of a good mother and wife, and the personal experience of motherhood, with clarity and candour.

“It was frustrating when they were very small. I would begin painting. Only to feel small hands tugging at my skirt. Then I would have to come down from the clouds to attend to them.

Any creative work is a difficult life for a woman if she is a wife and mother. Painting requires so much concentration. Inspiration does not come unless you can brood over it. Art cannot be conducted coldly and methodically like a business.”^x

Equally the National Library oral history interviews, especially that of 1966, where she discusses the forces that impacted on her career are foundational for any understanding of the fortunes of Australian women artists from c.1940 onwards. Stokes' comments resonate with statements upon the conflicts of career and homelife made by women artists working within the second and third wave feminist movements. Relatively few of her contemporaries from the 1930s and 1940s discussed the pressures facing women artists with such precision. As such, Stokes' observations are highly valuable first-person documents and have been much quoted.

Thirdly and most curiously, for an artist who personally emphasised the importance of formal and technical aspects of art, both to her own practice, and to her general definitions of artistic excellence, her art has generated considerable historical and theoretical discussion about her gender and her different career trajectory to her male contemporaries in public memory. Anne Summers' contrast of the high Imperial/Commonwealth and Federal Australian honours heaped upon the male stars of postwar art, Drysdale, Nolan, Dobell and Arthur Boyd and the sidelining of Stokes^{xi}, who, in the cultural life of Menzies' Australia, was frequently ranked as their equal, firmly establishes the inequality of Stokes' placement in Australian public memory. Summers' biographical and social history, *The Lost Mother* 2009 directed attention to Stokes' lifeworld and the context and constraints within which she worked.^{xii} Ironically if the sociopolitical aspects of her career have brought her to wider attention, this emphasis is the inverse of how Stokes herself understood artmaking. Artworld politics and changing paradigms of both public galleries and contemporary art, rather than any lack on her part, drove the changes in Stokes' reputation and public visibility. Although many Australian artists felt wounded and disenfranchised by the early-mid 1960s shift of public patronage from figuration to abstraction and conceptual art, and the ensuing favouring of young emerging artists, Stokes' public reputation seems to have been impacted more than many of her male contemporaries. Although reluctant to acknowledge it, the hurt was tangible to her.^{xiii}

Although Stokes' work is often read as open and uncomplicated, the recent biography, substantially compiled from unpublished papers, by her daughter Lucilla uncovers Stokes' richly layered intellectual probity and wideranging cultural experiences. Relatively few Melbourne contemporaries (apart from longterm expatriates) shared her first hand experiences of European art and culture. Stokes particularly made effective use of winning the 1929 National Gallery of Victoria Travelling Scholarship, not only training at the Royal Academy Schools, but also seeking out more radical tuition at the Andre Lhote academy in Paris. Thus she is placed in a small group of Australians such as Grace Crowley and Dorrit

Black who had studied in Paris. Her time in Paris gave her direct knowledge of the Ecole de Paris, which remained a lodestar for her practice. Both her studies of the female nude and of characters such as clowns, acrobats and dancers recall her engagement with early twentieth century French art. A second overseas trip, as an extended honeymoon and a business trip, also allowed for further overseas study and observation of both fine art and contemporary industrial design in Europe and Scandinavia. Equally on her two European journeys she observed social life and customs from traditional village life in Spain to the *Sturmabteilung* marching in Berlin.

Stokes had another personal conduit to European culture via her strong attachment to Catholicism. As testified by women as diverse as Mary McCarthy and Anne Marie Power^{xiv}, throughout the Anglozone in the early and mid twentieth century, even conservative Catholicism ported European art and history into everyday experience, making them accessible and familiar. Whilst in popular culture tropes, everyday twentieth century Catholicism now has a negative aura, it concurrently offered many of its followers a deep and rich cultural dimension. Stokes' classical, Europhile vision was sincere and no mere Norman Lindsay style dress-up: she knew this world and felt kinship with it.

A Biography

Stokes' robust and resilient talent was enigmatic. None of her immediate family were particularly creative. She pointed out how shy and naïve she was and that secondary school was torture except for art.^{xv} Her talent was spotted by Susan Cochrane, a lesser artist contemporary of Sutherland, Southern, Price, Vale et al, who taught at Genazanno. Cochrane gave Stokes private lessons and also encouraged her to study at the National Gallery School. Throughout her life Stokes remained grateful to Cochrane's professional advice and support, which enabled her to discover a purpose and direction in her life. Both teachers and students at the gallery always regarded her as exceptional from the very start. Bernard Hall joked that she must have been an artist in a previous life.^{xvi} As an exceptional student she bookended the conclusion of Hall's teaching career at the National Gallery School as Hugh Ramsay had launched its beginnings. He wrote glowingly of her talent. "You have always been such a satisfactory student and have a splendid record."^{xvii} She in turn always praised the solid grounding she received from Hall and the entree that he gave her to working with professional rigour.^{xviii}

Marriage led to her reducing her professional activities, but not before she had briefly set up a bohemian studio flat at the iconic studio complex at 9 Collins Street, that attracted some fame in the mid 1930s press.^{xix} Stokes spent considerable energy keeping in touch with professional colleagues, with the Thursday night drawing group organised by Bell offering a regular expansion beyond the domestic and interaction with some of the more senior creative figures in Melbourne. She never evaded the responsibilities in homemaking and childraising expected by both society and church in her lifetime, but still keenly felt the divergent pressures of her talent and accepted options for women's lives. Despite many pressures of homelife, Stokes's reputation reached stellar levels during the 1940s and 1950s, endorsed by Sir Kenneth Clark, Sir Daryl Lindsay, Sir Joseph Burke George Bell, Arnold Shore, Alan McCulloch and later Bernard Smith.

Unlike some Australian women artists of her generation, Stokes' husband was ultimately supportive of her art; he shared her avant-garde interests, particularly around cosmopolitan design. Family memory suggests that one of the early signs of the heart weakness that was to end Eric Stokes' life was brought on by a public event at the National Gallery of Victoria where the question of women's [implied lesser] talents as artists was being debated and Eric Stokes intended to defend his wife and women artists generally.^{xx} The early and sudden death of her husband sent Stokes into a deep depression, from which she emerged through working intensively on her art. An exhibition at Leveson Street Gallery confirmed the loyalty of collectors and triggered a final and lengthy bout of creative work. Many of the artworks shown here are from that late flowering. Although one should not romanticise Stokes' motivations; she was also conscious of having to keep herself financially solvent and deal with an alien world of commerce and transaction. Like many housewives of her generation, Stokes had stayed aloof from even

household and domestic finance. The need to make a living from art refocused her attention onto her practice and brokered a new independence and discipline.

Discussion of Stokes having been erased from the artworld fails to account for private collectors' and the art market's consistent endorsement of her work across nearly a century. Nine decades of collectors' and art market enthusiasm stands in direct contradiction to the wavering and changeable opinions of public institutions such as art museums and university art history departments, since the late 1950s. Even in the middle of her career when her output was limited, collectors, organisers of exhibitions and owners of galleries would plead for works – their letters are preserved in the artist's archive - or patiently join a waiting list for the next completed work.^{xxi} This current exhibition highlights Stokes' work via a platform i.e. an art dealership – that is substantially addressed to private collectors. Thus Stokes' works are presented to an audience whose loyalty and respect has never faltered.

Dr Juliette Peers, 2021

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- i For the National Library of Australia with Hazel de Berg 1965 and Barbara Blackman 1987
- ii She described herself as a “classical” painter
- iii Interview in *The Herald* 9 December 1952 p 15 cf interviews with both Hazel De Berg and Barbara Blackman
- iv Interview with Barbara Blackman
- v Interview with Barbara Blackman
- vi Lucilla Wyborn D'Abrera *Constance Stokes Art and Life*, Melbourne: Hill House Publishing pp. 206-215
- vii Catriona Quinn “Krimper in Context: The Place of Provenance in Design Research” *RMIT Design Archives Journal* Volume 5 no 2 2015 pp. 38-41
- viii In Wyborn D'Abrera p. 202
- ix *The Herald* 17 October 1949 p. 10
- x *The Herald* 9 December 1952 p. 15
- xi Wyborn D'Abrera p. ix
- xii Melbourne University Press 2009
- xiii As she comments to Barbara Blackman in 1987 “There was a time when Alan McCulloch and a few people like that dismissed Australian painters if they [happened] to be female. “I've had some really nasty things said about me “, but she does not elaborate. In an interview with Juliette Peers in 1986, Stokes also implied a sense of betrayal by major players in the artworld, curators and critics, possibly young and emerging, but again did not share precisely by whom and when, and certainly was reticent about voicing accusations against specific individuals.
- xiv Mary McCarthy *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood*, Harmondsworth: Penguin 1963, Juliette Peers *Anne Marie Power: the Journey Home to Rome* Winchester: Telos Art Publishing 2001
- xv Wyborn D'Abrera p. 14
- xvi Wyborn D'Abrera p. 22 Yet there were male students who cynically complained about Hall focussing too much attention upon women students claiming that he favoured women students due to his delight in flirting with them, not their talent. This attitude was openly expressed in Sam Ateyeo's 1932 scholarship painting that showed two recognisable female students with Hall as Lot and his daughters. There was much relief when the first scholarship competition after Hall's death was won by a male student Clifford Bayliss.
- xvii Letter Bernard Hall to Constance Parkin [Stokes] 6 January 1931 in Wyborn D'Abrera p. 36
- xviii Constance Stokes in conversation with Juliette Peers 1986
- xix *Australian Women's Weekly* 26th October 1935 p. 37
- xx Wyborn D'Abrera p. 105
- xxi <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-07-21/forgotten-artist-constance-stokes-gets-recognition-in-exhibition/8729478>