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978-0-521-58355-8 - Imagining the Antipodes: Culture, Theory and the Visual in the Work
of Bernard Smith

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IMAGINING
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CULTURE, THEORY AND THE VISUAL IN
THE WORK OF BERNARD SMITH

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P R E F A C E

In the autumn of 1992 I visited a friend of mine, Peter Gathercole, in Cambridge. I was bleary; a car alarm had been triggered in the middle of the night in London, where I'd been staying, so the night was sleepless, but the trip was pacific and I was pleased to catch up with Peter. We had met in 1990 in Brisbane at a conference on the work of the Australian Marxist archaeologist Vere Gordon Childe, and hit it off immediately, even though Peter was a specialist in anthropology and I was a refugee in sociology; he'd been a Marxist as well, indeed had been taught by Gordon Childe. In Cambridge we walked together and talked, took tea back at his flat. We'd spoken about Cambridge and communism, about my ongoing work on Australian intellectuals, and about his own acquaintance with Bernard Smith over the years. At 4 p.m. Peter took a nap, leaving me sitting at his desk downstairs with the various copies of Smith's books that Bernard had given him over the years. It dawned on me. I became convinced that I must write about Bernard Smith. Somehow his work spoke directly to me, across all those cleavages claimed to divide the generations. *Imagining the Pacific* was a strikingly contemporary way of seeing. The idea of European vision was brilliant. Bernard had left his umbrella with Peter on a previous visit. Could I perhaps return it? Finally I declined, because it was a real one, no fold-ups here and I was already overweight with books and things, though I knew I was passing up on an obvious excuse to call on Smith: 'Here, best wishes from Peter Gathercole, is your umbrella, my calling card . . .' So I got back on to the train without the umbrella, but with a commitment. I should write an essay at least – maybe a book? – on Smith's work. Of

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course I'd known of Smith before, as a Communist and art historian, and my friend Martha Macintyre seemed very often to have *European Vision and the South Pacific* on her desk.

I managed to find a copy in a London second-hand shop before I got on the plane. Back in Melbourne, I read his autobiography, *The Boy Adeodatus*, with intrigue, and the essays, began to gather other writings, and I wrote Bernard Smith a letter, introducing myself and stating my intentions. We made contact. I felt a strong attraction to Bernard Smith – a lovely man, as everyone said, someone who defended the locals but without the poisonous taint of chauvinism, saw that we were always ever cosmopolitan. We had both been schoolteachers, both been Marxists, had both slipped in the backdoor of the academy (though Bernard also went in the front door of the Warburg Institute). He confirmed his readiness to cooperate. We agreed that I should work through his papers, meticulously ordered and largely still in his possession. I planned to spend six months visiting his house, Jeansville, in Nicholson Street near the Exhibition Gardens, mainly on Fridays; but Bernard Smith was such a pleasure, and his work so intriguing, that it took another year again. For there were other connections for me as well. I realised that Smith's home was in exactly the same area of Fitzroy that my parents and in-laws had inhabited on arrival as aliens in Melbourne. Bell Street and Johnston Street were what they called 'the old stamping ground'. There were other echoes. From Bernard's upstairs room, where I worked, I could see the Women's Hospital, where my wife and later our children were born. I watched the seasons change and imagined my folks on the street. I came upon odd memories of my own discovery of the world of art, and I remembered my friends who tried to break in to the art scene. So I sat and pondered Bernard's books and paintings, files, papers, reviews and manuscripts, letters and passports, itineraries and postcards. But best of all, this was the first living archive I'd had the privilege of working with, so we'd talk of many things, share a meal, wash up, and when my children came to visit they were not only encouraged to use the banisters, things unknown to them, but given clues on how aerodynamically to maximise acceleration. When the time came to write, to stay home at my own desk, I felt sad, but here, nevertheless, is the result.

As I explain later, this is not a biography, though Bernard Smith certainly deserves one. Nor is it a work in art history or criticism. This

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may surprise some, but it ought not, for my purpose is to defend a way of thinking about the world we inhabit. This is an argumentative essay, which seeks both to establish and to defend the content of Smith's work. Smith's work is useful in the best possible sense; it is good to think with. So there are parts of the argument which follow which may be mine more than his, and the other way around. Finally, this is a book about identity and being in the world system, based on a sequential reading of Smith's published works and on a careful reading of his private papers, which remain largely in his possession but will later find a home in the collections of the Mitchell and the Australian National Library. My thanks, first of all, go to Bernard. I am grateful for the help of Peter Gathercole, Terry Smith, Martha Macintyre, Stuart Macintyre, Ian McLean, Beryl Langer and Ian Britain. Terry and Stuart offered abundant and thoughtful criticism of the penultimate draft. To Stuart I owe an especial word of thanks; for years now he has supported me in everything I have done, for no apparent reason other than that I have chosen to do it. Chris Wallace-Crabbe's generosity of spirit has been unbroken; it is more than I deserve. Robert Dessaix and Peter Timms gave me encouragement and their wisdom and wit. My friend and colleague Trevor Hogan manages still to find the patience to read everything I write, and to help me improve it. Fuyuki Kurasawa read the final draft for me. My own final reading of the manuscript reminded me how much I owe to Cornelius Castoriadis. John Iremonger and Humphrey McQueen helped me to clarify what the book was not. Phillipa McGuinness helped me confirm what it was. Ruth Fincher and David Goodman of the Australian Centre at Melbourne University and Barry Hindess at the Research School, Australian National University, gave me space to think. I am grateful, as ever, for the help of the archivists at the Mitchell Library and the endless kindness of the Sociology support staff at La Trobe. The manuscript was typed by Bronwyn Bardsley, Beth Robertson, Elaine Young and Merle Parker. Maggi and Kate gave me friendship I had no right to expect. That this book is for Bernard will be obvious; between the lines, it is for Judy Robinson. Let it also be for Rhea and Nikolai, Moni and Dor.

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INTRODUCTION

Who is Bernard Smith? Now eighty, with more than a dozen books to his credit, Bernard Smith is most widely known as an art historian and critic. Others will know a different, related Smith – as anthropologist – this time for his work on the Pacific and the West. These are probably his two most obvious audiences, those who read *Australian Painting* and those who read *European Vision and the South Pacific* respectively, and usually in isolation. Other readers will know another Smith; those who work in literature or biography or who work in Australian Studies will likely identify him with his autobiography, *The Boy Adeodatus*. He has done more, however, than work with words. Others yet again will know him as local activist and educator, teacher and founder of the Power Institute in Sydney, art critic for the *Melbourne Age*, 1940s Communist, lifelong Marxist. According to Humphrey McQueen, Smith is Australia's greatest living historian; as Smith himself put it, his work is in cultural history with a primary interest in the visual.¹ Yet students of Australian history probably barely consider his work, and social theorists have their heads in other places. Certainly, as you read through reviews and papers Smith's work is credited with being visionary; a copy of *European Vision* seems to sit on every obvious anthropologist's desk. Most recently, for example, the extraordinary work of Nicholas Thomas takes up its own orientation via Smith.² Now there is even an undeclared struggle of sorts over the legacy; for it is the anthropologists who seek more actively to follow Smith, perhaps, than the art historians, and it is not too much of a provocation to say that Smith's greatest impact has been in *European Vision* rather than *Australian Painting*.

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Who, then, reads Bernard Smith? Apparently anthropologists and art historians, though they do not obviously read the same books, and readers of biography, whose curiosity imaginably does not extend to the more scholarly works. And this would be the obvious place for a newcomer to start. I'd say, if asked: 'Read the autobiography first, then *European Vision and the South Pacific*. Or else try this book, or seek out the essay penned by Bernard Smith in 1950 where the ideas which coordinate *European Vision* were first spelled out, before my time. In any case, read Smith'.

There is an irony, then, in the reception of Smith's work. Some people will know it very well, but partially, and this often in both senses. This book is partly for them, for its argument is that there is an extraordinary integrity in Smith's work; it needs, really, to be read or considered all together for its splendour and impact to become fully apparent. But this book is also for those who have never read Smith, those in sociology or politics, philosophy or cultural studies to whom the name may mean nothing on first contact. My claim is that Smith is best read, in fact, as a social theorist, a theorist of peripheral vision. His is a project of profound insight, not least of all into what hitherto has been called 'national character', matters to do with cultures local and imperial, central and peripheral. So the imaginary audience for this book is those who already know Smith's work, but partially, and also those who will not know his work at all, but whose time is ripe.

Is this a book for art historians? I can only honestly answer this question by saying that I do not know. Likely some in that field will view me as a poacher, and fail to recognise the Smith they were brought up with in these pages. To them, and others, I could only say: sit down with the works, and read them serially, inquire for yourself into the conceptual constellations that hold Smith's thinking together. For the argument that I put here is that Bernard Smith's work is perhaps the most significant social theory yet generated by an Australian. This is not a biography, though it includes an attempt to place Smith in context; its larger aspiration is to place Smith's work in intellectual context, both with reference to his other writings and with reference to the cultures which created his work. It is an attempt at an integral reading of his work; and it is a proposal that his work is good to think with, capable of extension. Indeed, my own sense is that Smith's work, often misunderstood and sometimes maligned in its own time, was so

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far ahead of its time that it can only now be understood, when the rest of us have caught up. It may be the case that it is only now that we can read his work properly, or in such a manner as to address openly those questions summarised by Gauguin: where have we come from? who are we? where are we going? For Bernard Smith is a major thinker in the history of European consciousness, as well as a central source for imagining the antipodes.

Imagining the Antipodes then involves a thinking through of the work of Bernard Smith. The meaning of the title will become more apparent as the argument of this book unfolds. The idea of interpretation plays on both meanings of 'thinking', thinking through, with, the work, working it through and viewing through it, using it, viewing it as a living legacy rather than an authorial voice or claim to authority. The first chapter of this book begins with Smith's autobiography, partly as context, partly to set out some themes, sources, in order to establish some issues of identity and naming. Like Antonio Gramsci, Smith came to know both centre and periphery, and came to problematise the complex processes of cultural power and exchange between them. He came, in particular, to think about politics and art civilisationally, in terms of a notional sensibility that history seems always to repeat itself but never in exactly the same form, especially into the phase after the Renaissance which we call modernity. The second chapter then describes and discusses Smith's two texts on Australian painting, *Place, Taste and Tradition* and *Australian Painting*. My reading of these books suggests that Smith early establishes basic themes about cultural imperialism as a necessarily unequal but nevertheless generative process; the subordinate, or colonial partners in the global relation of master and slave also affect the dominant culture, however opaquely. Culture, like power, never follows absolutely unilateral circuits or flows; this is one reason why, or one sense in which, progress occurs at the same time as does cultural decay or retrogression. In the third chapter we shift into what, arguably, is the centre of Smith's work: the corpus of his work on imperialism, the Pacific and ways of seeing. Smith's writing on Australian art needs to be read in this context, against the backdrop of his work on the Pacific; for the analysis of the Pacific runs into Europe just as that on Australian painting leads to the centres of Europe and America and back. To put this in different terms, Smith is always working on the axis which we call the antipodes; but

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the antipodes must be understood as a *relation*, not a place. Neither Australia, nor Argentina, nor New Zealand constitute essentialist places where the antipodes is found in the soil or inscribed into the landscape; being antipodean necessarily means being constructed into a relationship of subordination which is usually called colonial, or post-colonial. Chapter 4 expands on this theme of being antipodean, as it shifts directly into *The Antipodean Manifesto* drafted by Smith, and the controversy which still surrounds it. The fifth chapter then turns to the discussion of Australian painters, especially those who might be significant for Smith. Smith's own lapse from the medium of paint, his choice of the word, helps to explain his biographical work on Noel Counihan; Counihan in a way is Smith's alter ego, at least in the sense that he followed a path open to Smith but which Smith chose to close. Counihan stayed with paint and more conventionally with communism; Smith's journey took him elsewhere. Smith's work on Jack Lindsay, similarly, represents a kind of homage to a thinker at once inspirational and embodying a different path. I call this chapter 'Death of the Hero as Artist' as a way to include Smith's views on 'The Death of the Artist as Hero', and to discuss his particular views of significant others, such as John Brack, Fred Williams and Francis Lyburner and critics like Robert Hughes and Peter Fuller. Chapter 6 then takes up Smith's arguments concerning modernism, modernity and post-modernity.

The conclusion returns to and extends the major organising theme, that of imagining the antipodes. It seeks further to clarify the nature of Smith's work as social theory, as an historicism which enables theory to happen. Smith's project is one characterised by a remarkable theoretical consistency, within which changes and developments have more to do with shifting substantive concerns than with changes of mind or heart. Smith's orienting themes animate all his work, right across a fifty-year writing period. These arguments both reach back to the war period and extend into his critical response to our century and, in a way, anticipate the questions of the philosophy of history with which the study opens. For it is with history that Bernard Smith's work begins and ends, and in this and much else we follow him.

This book, then, is both an integral reading of Smith's work, and a specifically located interpretation of its theoretical impact. Yet Smith defines his own work as cultural history, not as social theory. What

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might it mean to speak of culture, theory and the visual as ways in which to read Smith? Why read his work in these terms, and not, say, as art history, given his chosen field of profession? Certainly it is customary to describe Bernard Smith as Australia's leading art historian, though there are now more competitors for that role than there were thirty years ago, and the younger people he often taught might be inclined to question the judgement, view themselves as leaders instead. Smith's self-definition is indeed as an historian of art, only he diverges from the stricter sensibilities concerning art in order to define it broadly as well as narrowly. He employs both an anthropological as well as an aesthetic sense of art. On the one hand, art is defined as high culture, in particular established genres, and judged by Kantian criteria of taste. On the other, it encompasses virtually everything we make or do, from children's papier-mâché forms to visual design, tables and chairs, crafts as well as high art. Bernard Smith actually persists with this dual vision, for it indicates both professional and democratic or popular sensibilities. For Smith, there will always be at least two meanings of art.³ These tensions work through history or civilisations. Smith's project is an historicism, consistently guided by the sense that style or meaning is historical. It is anthropological, in the sense that it offers ways of thinking which draw upon practical culture as well as on exemplary works or styles of art. All this is to say that Smith's project is also theoretical, in an historical way, using the visual as its customary subject matter, whether artwork or artifact. To speak of *Imagining the Antipodes*, then, is to evoke not fantasy but the anticipation of activity and its mental shadowing, for as we are, so do we imagine. And we imagine within flows of culture and history which are beyond our choosing. We create, but not *ex nihilo*, not exactly as we please. We work in and through a plurality of traditions, and imaginably the quality of the results of these processes depends upon the consciousness we have of these flows and not only upon our talents. The enormity of Bernard Smith's scholarly achievement is matched only by the modesty of his methodological approach to making sense of the world. For as we interpret, so do we use what is given us, so does our work return into the streams of history which make us.