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Perpetua Durack Clancy

Eddie Burrup – A Daughter's View

For the past twelve years, the subject of Eddie Burrup has been a looming presence (rather like a phantom elephant) that everyone – when I'm around, at any rate – has neatly side-stepped. It's most refreshing to see the subject out in the open at last. Admittedly, the phenomenon addressed by Louise Morrison in "The Art of Eddie Burrup" is complex and would account, in part, for a reluctance to explore its diverse facets.

In all the hullabaloo that followed Elizabeth Durack's revelation (in *Art Monthly Australia*, March 1997) that she had created an Aboriginal persona and was producing work in his name – it seems to me that most observers became lost in the woods; few stood back sufficiently to look a little more closely at the trees. Had they done so, they might have conceded that, first and foremost, the invention of Eddie Burrup is an ingenious work of art – one that combines paint, pen and performance. Some observers, rather than focusing on what the artist had the effrontery to do and concocting wacky theories about it, might have looked at the quality of the work itself and considered what it was communicating. Still others might have detected an experiment, a device – in the centuries-old tradition of pseudonyms – to obtain objective assessment of work and ideas.

Be all that as it may, the spin in *Art Monthly*'s sensational media release about Elizabeth Durack reincarnated as an Aboriginal male, producing and exhibiting paintings by him, set the tone for what followed, and ensured that whatever had happened, it must be denounced. With few exceptions, arts media and academic commentators dubbed Elizabeth Durack a "colonialist" (as if this explained everything) and sanctimoniously proceeded to impute base motives to her assumption of a black male alter ego. To their credit, the general public saw a witty side to it all. Studious analysis of *The Art of Eddie Burrup – "whatever can Elizabeth have been thinking of …?"* must await another day. All there is space for now is a few general comments and a brief response to some points Louise Morrison raises.

The remarkable thing about *The Art of Eddie Burrup* is that, whichever way one looks at it, there's no denying the work is powerfully redolent of Aboriginality. How this came about is a long story and a crucial one. Sufficient now to say that at the end of a long working life, Elizabeth took the calculated risk of producing work in the name of Eddie Burrup. And she entered paintings by him in two dedicated Aboriginal-only exhibitions in order to have the work noticed on its merits, for its own intrinsic worth. In this goal she succeeded. As the work of Eddie Burrup, it moved people to tears; it was applauded and hailed as that of a genius. The irony is that, for the very same work, Elizabeth Durack was vilified, ridiculed and defamed …

From the outset Elizabeth Durack's artistic motivation had been shaped and influenced by art, and by experiences far removed from the well-documented sources of inspiration in leading metropolitan centres. It was the land and people of East Kimberley – a remote region of northern Australia – where Elizabeth found fiat and stimulus to develop the style and singular vision that places her work in a category of its own.[1]

In the last decade of Elizabeth's life, when her beloved sister, Mary, was dying, and when she was deeply concerned by the turn of political events occurring on Australia's "rim," she was producing a series of paintings she was calling "morphological" works. They had evolved from earlier work, notably the big series *The Rim, the rim of our brittle and disintegrating world*, yet were different, a breakthrough from what had gone before. When she first showed me the morphological works (it was a day or so after Christmas, 1994), they had no titles, they were not signed and, familiar as I was with her work, they bowled me over. I said: "These are 'Aboriginal' works ... how are you doing them? Why are you doing them? You can't show them. They won't be looked at, never accepted, as works by Elizabeth Durack … under another name, perhaps – any other name – particularly an Aboriginal name, they'd be highly acclaimed, but you'd never come at that." Elizabeth agreed – a nom de brush was not on the cards – and no more was said.

A day later we were walking along the edge of the Swan River when, out of the blue, Elizabeth said: "You know, Perpetua, I might consider signing those morphological works under another name." From that precise moment Eddie Burrup appeared, fully formed (as it were), before us. The subsequent development of this character and of his art proved extraordinarily liberating. Paintings poured out. Transporting herself imaginatively as a contemporary male with a long past, Elizabeth transferred onto paper and canvas a lifetime of association, shared experiences, adventures, memories, songs and anecdotes heard in the twilight years

of lost worlds. As Louise Morrison has acutely observed: "Perhaps Burrup can be understood as a conduit for Durack's vast reservoir of knowledge and experiences with Aboriginal people and culture." In similar vein Maureen Smith has said: "The story of Eddie Burrup and *The Art of Eddie Burrup* is a resource. Much of what it contains is no longer retrievable. With it, elliptical time, as obtained in the *Ngarangani,* (the Dreaming) is reasserted and who can say that a new paradigm for reconciliation has not been defined?"[2]

Fast rewind now, to 1953. In that year Elizabeth Durack produced a series of ten paintings that were extraordinary for their empathic recreation of aspects of Aboriginal life and culture. The series, *The Cord to Altcheringa*, had stemmed from personal experience of ceremonies, from familiarity with Stone Age masterpieces on rock faces in northern Australia, and from lessons learnt from Jubul, a bark painter from Arnhem Land. Elizabeth went on to produce three more comparable series: *Chant for Kurdaitcha* (1954), *Love Magic* (1954) and *The Legend of the Black Swan* (1956). All were inspired by Aboriginal ritual and legends, a fact clearly acknowledged at the time.

The Cord to Altcheringa was purchased in 1953 for the University of Western Australia through the Tom Collins Bequest. In the same year, Vice-Chancellor Stanley Prescott asked Elizabeth for a description of the series. Her reply to the Vice-Chancellor must be somewhere in the university archives but to date has not been located. In the meantime, here are extracts from a draft dated January 1954, located among her papers:

> "The more I endeavour to write a 'description' of the paintings … the more impossible it becomes … I could proceed at tedious length on the fact that visually the works stem from what I know of our Aboriginal sacred life and ceremony; that the paintings hang around this ceremony … however, without wishing to indulge in fantasy I can frankly say I am not quite sure where this particular crop of work came from. I know that while I worked on it I was in a peculiar state of being possessed – this particular expression called for this particular treatment. 'Why,' said one of our local art savants, 'why, with all the benefits of the twentieth-century palette and Mr Windsor and Newton at your disposal should you have chosen to make mud pies of mud ochres and charcoal?' To which I could only lamely answer, 'I don't know.' … the fact is whatever I have captured of the tenuous Cord to Altcheringa could not be translated … through the multi-coloured array of pigments developed over centuries of research but only by a reversion to the first available medium, and by

a re-orientation to the primary arrangements of composition and formal construction …."

The Cord to Altcheringa hung in Winthrop Hall for thirty years and was seen by thousands of students and visitors. By the early 1990s, or perhaps it was the late 1980s, the pictures were taken down for reasons unclear. They are housed now in the splendid storage facilities of UWA's Lawrence Wilson Art Gallery.

The art critic and writer Patricia Anderson has said: "A painter – like a novelist who writes, or a composer who composes – is someone who wakes up in the morning and paints. Everything revolves around this imperative. Even when there are lapses, delinquencies, disruptions, fallow times – even a crisis of confidence – the imperative remains. The creator alone understands the lonely journey and its hoped-for outcome."[3]

It's a comment that resonates strongly for me as that is what Mother used to do. She used to get up in the morning and paint (or write) and often was still at it late at night. Of course she had lapses, disruptions, crises of confidence but for over sixty years she was a person driven by the imperative of developing and honouring her God-given gift, of seeking to capture, to recreate, an essence of thought and vision – whether it be of a wildflower, a wayward child, bush roads or old and sacred ceremonies.

Over the "lonely journey" of her long working life, Elizabeth Durack produced a great deal of work, some of which came almost too easily, some of which she struggled with, much of which simply poured out. In the end the daemon, Eddie Burrup, possessed her.

Notes

1 The work as a whole falls loosely into two streams: either *Out of Sight* (alternatively 'The Harvest of the Eye') or *Out of Mind* (alternatively 'The Mill of the Imagination'). It was the latter stream of thinking and work that most preoccupied Elizabeth, that influential out-of-tune critics dismissed and to which *The Art of Eddie Burrup* belongs.

2 *The Art of Eddie Burrup.* Exhibition brochure, Rebecca Hossack Gallery, London, July 2000. Scott Print, Perth, May 2000.

3 Patricia Anderson, review of Bernard Smith's *The Formalesque: A Guide to Modern Art and its History*, *Quadrant* 52, 2008, 7–8.