

SIGNATURE

Extracts from a manuscript – by Elizabeth Durack.
Reflections on art and life and a part-reply to critics.

written at the Black Rock Ivanhoe Station East Kimberley
Western Australia, August 1948.

... it would be safe to say that it is inadvisable for an artist to comment upon his own work, knowing as he does that comment is both unnecessary and superfluous; and, as it is impossible to say everything, it is wisest to say nothing.

However, as an envelopment of words has become so much a part of Art today and because words of a sort have already commenced to drape themselves around my pictures, I presume, with due apology to the reader ... to add a few, what I hope might be, directional comments. This I do because hardly a statement made to date, no matter how favourably inclined, seems to me to have any actual bearing on or relation to my own motives or ideas. No doubt practically every artist suffers a similar reaction, and if he is patient and forbearing so much more to his credit. I am neither.

The hardest single thing that I have had to contend with when showing pictures is not that people in the Australian cities know nothing about the aborigines, but that they all do know *something*. They come to my exhibitions with minds pre-conditioned – by something they have heard; some brief personal experience; some book they have read – prepared to see reason for some vague sensation

of guilt ... Sometimes, as when some ancient family secret is stirred, active antipathy ...

Even as the whole of the arts (music, song, dance, painting, sculpture, drama,) are so readily interchangeable, so too are the various races of humanity, and although I may continue to paint Australian aborigines with increasing exactitude and literacy I look in painting them, not only at native people, but beyond them to all human beings. They are the notes, the words if you like, the movements, the expressions of thought and idea in general. One uses them to transmit what one has learned of all people, including one's self and one's neighbour, who as the Bible tells us, is all mankind. Perhaps because of this mental preconditioning I speak of, and the vexed social issues now gathering momentum around "the natives", they are not the most fortunate choice of subject matter. However, I can neither help nor be concerned with this. It would be, in fact, nearer the truth to say not so much that I have chosen them but that they have chosen me, for among the many reasons why I turn continually to them – or they to me, perhaps – is that I am able in one bound as it were to get at the things I want, simple basic things, qualities inherent in the hearts of all peoples; but which often, with civilised people are so camouflaged – so overlaid with impenetrable mazes of undergrowth – that any attempt to pierce such formidable defences would be thwarted.

Although it is redundant to speak today of the close relationship of all living races, the oneness of the human family and the comparatively recent yesterday when the wandering tribes in a wave or waves reached Australia, that which is not perhaps felt or realised with the same intensity as I experience, is how, when once here, the land itself took part in their shaping and development...

It is this fusing and shaping on the part of the land itself – of living human flesh and bone – that makes the aborigines for me an object of such constant joy, excitement and wonder. They are the very land incarnate, the very colour of the earth in its hundred shades and inflections, from golden sand to vermilion to deepest blue and purple. I never use any other colour to paint their skin but that which is on my brush from painting the ground beneath their feet. The harmony is exact and identical. The crevices of the rocks or sodden plains, the fire-spared summits or the charred limbs of the trees, the elbow in its loose peculiar articulation, the yellow flowered kapok and the highlight upon flesh, the down of grass at noon over the flesh-soft, hard-baked bone of the desert, and in the evening the muted purples of the hills wrapping alike themselves and their people in slumberous coitus ...

This affinity between the land and the people and between myself to the land through the people, one which I have arrived at through long and dispassionate association, seemed to me at first to be something I had alighted upon independently. In fact it is only what has been occurring all through – although Nature's results have been more tangible and lovely than my puny pictures – and the large, increasing population of half-white half-aboriginal people represents one of the healthiest and most heartening aspects in this part of Australia. The affinity between black and white lies in their relation to the land. The black is of the country before time; the white bridges the gap between a strange, stark, alien land and home, and it is the peace and acceptance of *home* that pervades the heart. For the black a home inherited by instinct and long association; for the white a home acquired by effort. In this, black and white can be in harmony. Nature makes no mistakes. If social codes and laws lag behind, prejudice and phobias overshadowing, they will catch up in time...

... One of the reasons for commencing upon these notes has been the glibness with which people seek to classify and pigeon-hole my work. "Elizabeth Durack's approach to her material is subjective – it should be viewed and assessed as illustration ... ", "These illustrations ...", "The well-known illustrator now showing ...", are just a few of similar comments clipped from newspapers over the last few months.

Illustration. Yes, one illustrates. So does a symphony, a play, an abstraction. Frankly I do not know quite what is meant by "illustration" as spoken of like this, except that it seems a way for the erudite to draw some nice distinction between illustration "not to be viewed from the standard of pure Art" and some cold-drawn fish-dead product of their Academy.

Viewed in sequence, my earlier work (or that better known section of it in book form), indeed the whole of the vast despoiling of paper and canvas that has gone on since before I can remember, is something I have been more or less obliged to drag around with me like my body, attempting at times, as with the latter, to abandon it altogether but always forced ultimately to come to terms with it. When one is a child one paints and draws as a child. One thinks as a child. One sits in the corner of a room beyond the flow of adult life and commits to memory every line of a face and every tone of voice. Later one conveys it to paper. One *learns* to draw. There is perspective – a lot of measuring with one eye closed and a pencil extended at arm's length – and there is shading. Drawing is a subject like Algebra or Latin. One can "pass", "fail" or gain a "distinction". One emerges suddenly and without warning into a strange world ... strange sights and sounds, strange people and places, into the beginning of all real feeling, the beginning it even seems of Being itself. Extraordinary revelations become inter-woven with the terror of dawning consciousness.

Divorced now from the familiar towards what? Towards some field which will lie forever untilled? – or to reap soon a stranger harvest? Earth sensitised for germination almost to explosion point ... Where now the lost boundaries? Colour, class, creed, shape, form, object, idea, thought, sight, humour, pathos, anger, contempt, pity and hate – now inextricably mixed – dissolve completely in a disorder that imposes its own order, inducing a meaning and reason from chaos, compelling the pursuit of some goal forever beyond attainment. Yet through the general inundation, somewhere a thin attenuated *lifeline* emerges sufficient to sustain resolvable outlines ...Illustration. Yes, one illustrates.

Another favoured pigeonhole for my work is "documentary". "Elizabeth Durack's work is in a sense a document ..." "This document ..." "A document of our neglected responsibility ..."

If the work has documentary value this is incidental, a by-product, like coke once the coal is spent. But to classify me as a painter whose primary intention is to document, although perhaps not meant unfavourably, is quite inaccurate.

There is no better method of securing a document of a certain set of people and their conditions, life, work, than with a moving camera. I am no moving camera. For one thing, I am never so busy. I miss too much. Whole worlds roll past me and I sleep through them all. No moving camera could lie for hours in the sun examining the shapes of sand particles. Its films would go out of date were it to spend the weeks of contemplation and inactivity wherein one retreats from all normal life, back and back into a receding shell, examining the anatomy of hollowness ...

"Elizabeth Durack represents the artist with the social conscience – she would perhaps make a good crusader ..."

"At last in the work of this artist we have someone fighting the cause of the aborigines."

All such statements come as both a surprise and somewhat of a shock to me. Do I? Am I? I ask myself. It never occurred to me. To be logical if one were pursuing such a course of action one would or should openly leave the world and become a missionary. But alas I am ill adapted for such a noble profession and cannot imagine a time when I ever would be. If I paint a native camp, far from being horrified as a welfare worker would be and as I am constantly credited with being, nearer the truth is that I am quite enchanted with the dusty harmonies of sun-bleached dresses, tattered trousers and rusty mias. However although knowledge of the complicated tangle, the interplay and interdependence of black community on white and vice versa tends to induce a preference to remain silent on all such matters, and despite the fact that in words one seeks usually to make the self-protecting or slightly cynical statement, no doubt in the freer and more direct medium of paint one does indeed reveal in spite of oneself sympathy, and something of what is meant by love in its broadest sense. To me words are a wretched medium. It seems so very easy to say one thing and mean another. I cannot do this in painting. The meaning may at first be obscure, but study and perseverance will always reveal it to those genuinely in search of it. My subject matter is always simple and lucid even though the treatment may not be. No tricks, no mirrors, no slick, misleading titles. What you see you see. What you receive is up to you. What is given is given.

Often and often I paint women and children and more women and more children because I am a woman and have children. I understand these things. Men remain largely a mystery to me. I meet them only sometimes in their Art, paint them only when special circumstances reveal them to me. Apart from this I have very little knowledge of them at all, or of

what makes them tick. I cannot explain why they are stiff, unnecessary and superfluous in my large murals – and why I am instantly harmonised with the mother's vigilant watchful eye and hand, with the distrusting discerning reluctant child, its unconscious selfishness, its warmth, its vulnerability, its hidden hurt and flamboyant assertion.

And on all sides I see around me nothing but evidence for hope, belief, confidence and faith in the essential dignity and nobility of Man – in his ability to fuse with yet transcend and dominate the most inhospitable environment, his capacity to turn a desert into home, his ever-present tendency to overflow into generosity, joy and laughter, not of mockery and self-derision, but the laughter that is in harmony with the music of the spheres.

I cannot explain this strong sensation of optimism that stems from some hidden spring, despite evidence that contradicts it so strongly, despite experience and observation that should on any reasonable basis historically or actually express the opposite, despite even an ever-present foreboding of personal doom and the despair that seizes me at times – in the trough of a wave, on a spinifex plain, high at night above a lighted city, waking too early to the desolation of the pre-dawn hours on the eighth floor.

In spite of everything, the well is there. Press back the weeds and the water bubbles silently to the surface; such as when after long time and test a desert native takes you into his confidence and reveals the spring of ancient and holy water.

Why not leave Australia? This is a suggestion I hear constantly. Why must I go? ... to the sick, heart-weary, recognised centres of culture ... I have no intention of going. A little parochialism is something to be guarded in our contracting world. Fundamentally the whole is here

and now. The reward is in the moment when I put down the brush and give myself up to the luxury of examining a completed work. It is a reward that grows with an increasing capacity, finding in the execution itself, the solution to doubts and irresolution, the priceless, the immeasurable ...

In the meantime, the sun sets on a long day. A pale waif of a new moon slips behind the range. The coolibahs are tattered lace along the horizon, and a snatch of wild song floats on the air. I find I am wearied by this bout of introspection. Points I wished to make, thoughts I sought to express that seemed important a few hours ago now, no longer seem so. Emphasis appears childish. I feel myself saying: so what? I have dispensed with my would-be classifiers because there is nothing to classify or pigeon hole. The pictures are simply to be looked at, each an entity in itself and representing a reaction or set of reactions to a sight, object, person or group that in some way has matched my ideas.

That the work embraces illustration, document and social conscience I will concede, but merely *embraces*, and is not specifically any of these things. A tide comes in and unevenness is levelled. A unity is reached through dissolution. Boundaries collapse; dividing lines no longer exist. Time, the organic, space, and the inorganic, share alike a common sensibility. One is driven along by invisible impulses. At one moment the whole of the universe resides in the eye of a child. The next the answer is patent in a group of goats on a stony hill. In one swift lunge of a horse's neck all force, harmonised and creative, is embodied.

What occurs? What is the mental, spiritual, physical unification that occurs? A fuse, suddenly and unexpectedly, is lit. Subject, thought, and idea with

hand and eye mutely obeying, are unified into something whole, complete, and often unbelievably simple.

An eeriness, an impermanence, pervades everything. The too bright of the dark, the gloom of strong daylight ... Something always eludes. One always pursues; alone yet enveloped timelessly.

Sometimes one is so sure. All is clear. One knows what one is doing and why. Then, just as suddenly, the sureness slips away along with the reality. A door, previously unseen, opens. One enters but hardly has one become adjusted to the light or the quiet and felt one's way around, when another door just as mysteriously swings ajar.

And no power on earth can keep you from going through.

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