

CONFESS and CONCEAL

On Political Correctness in the Art World

An essay from the early 1990s a time when the term "political correctness" was still quite new — at least in Australia.

In the short space of time since Robert Manne wrote "On Political Correctness" (*Quadrant* Jan–Feb 1993) and so wittingly/wittily described and located the provenance of Political Correctness for those of us who are even later developers than he declared himself to be, the phenomenon has become more evident and appears to be gathering momentum. Its career has been aided too by the recent elections, which, as it turned out, proved sheer serendipity for all adherents, devotees and Friends of PC generally.

Nowhere more so than in the Art world has Political Correctness become assertively rampant. Covert for some time, it is currently operating quite openly and from being, previously, a single thread among many, it now threatens to overtake and, at the same time, down-grade all other Art activity thus to become the only worth-while, worth funding, worth viewing Art expression in Australia today.

If an artist fails to grasp this and if he/she cannot succeed in becoming a part of it then he/she is up the proverbial creek without the proverbial paddle and might as well give up.

While Political Correctness, as Manne points out, derived from the academies of the US, in Australia the starting point for the Art take-over was the establishment of the Australia Council for the Arts in the early 1970s. Since then Art as a centralised arm of government has become sturdily entrenched and analogous to the prickly pear or the rabbit while the great wide vacant expanse that is the Australian mind offers limitless space and ideal conditions for propagation on a grand scale.

We now propose to proffer some advice to aspirant artists on how to deal with this development, to point out some of the hazards with which the road to qualifying as a PC artist is strewn and to demark certain advantages under the circumstances.

1. As a short cut into PC Art it is a plus not to have been born in Australia. To be 'Ethnic' and from southern Europe, say, is quite good but to be Asian is even better. Best of all, and to really shine as a pulsating star of Political Correctness, is to be loudly and declaratorily "Aboriginal". Reference to even the vaguest and most attenuated link with Aboriginality is all that is necessary.

(footnote: It needs to be said that we are not here referring to genuine Aboriginal artists of the calibre and lineage of, for instance, the Papunya-Tula school the sheer quality of whose work sets them quite apart from the theme of this critique.)

2. In contrast to all other periods in history it can now be actually beneficial to be a woman preferably a very young one and one partnered by an active PC male. It is advisable for an aspiring woman artist to acquire some degree – a failed degree is OK – and if the subjects chosen contain a unit or two of Anthropology, Psychology and "Cultural Studies", with the latter served up in trendy PC mode, all to the good. A Fine Arts Diploma from Open Learning or some such Academy can help but is not of much value because a natural gift for drawing or the acquisition of this skill is a disadvantage and, in fact, something to be avoided.

3. An artist who can neither draw nor paint but who enjoys a close relationship with a teacher or mentor in the Art limelight – a taste twister of repute – can also expect to be admitted into the ranks of the Chosen. To be young and malleable – to be New – is always an advantage. A Discovery properly presented and supported is acceptable to sponsors and decision makers alike and is in direct line for a Major Grant of indefinite duration.

4. By and large the advantages of possessing no talent, skill or originality cannot be too strongly emphasised. Maturity, perseverance, a long record of

productive and consistent work are all serious handicaps and all such baggage should, if possible, be discarded or kept dark.

An additional drawback is ever to have been stimulated to produce work that derives from a direct visual response to sight or scene. Worse still is to produce anything that stems from an opposite conceptual viewpoint or one that has never been wot of in Australian art except by the ancient ones.

Paradoxically this can be viewed as politically incorrect.

However, should perchance an artist happen to be both young and talented but to have already fallen into one of the above pitfalls, he/she should not despair. They can still qualify provided he/she is prepared to recant and to radically change his/her style so that any vestige of good drawing or technique is stripped away and the resulting product made ugly, lumpy, big (big is important) and invested with a Politically Correct Message – a Green statement, a Royal Monarchy send-up would be good. Commitment to PC is all that matters. This is the passport to Beulah Land and to all good things including, very likely, representation in the National Gallery of Australia.

5. It is an advantage if an artist does not happen to be a several generation Anglo-Celtic Australian. Such types, one way or another, are currently suspect and tend to be associated with Australia's dark and awful past as so felicitously exposed for us by an ever-growing number of PC historians rewriting the books and burning the old ones.

6. The PC artist never operates in isolation but is always enveloped in a protective sheath which ensures he is free from financial stress. Exhibitions are held quite independent of any commercial aspect. For the PC artist support and recognition come effortlessly from celestial regions aseptically removed from grubby Bugis street. Thus the PC artist can completely ignore the general public who, as we should know by now, is without either taste or understanding and in dire need of re- education. (Is it ever revealed what happens to all the 500cm x 700cm paintings? and all the huge fragile installations?)

An artist who makes a commercial success of things will find it virtually impossible to ever attain true PC status. This is one of the more curious aspects of the PC Art happening and no satisfactory explanation has yet come to light. It is better for successful but rejected artists to forget about it all and just continue to go on quietly crying all their way to the bank. (several artists cited.)

7. It should be remembered that single isolated Applications dispatched to the desk of the Visual Arts section of the Australia Council from artists of any ilk or gender carry no weight what-so-ever and if the mandatory referees, for all their eminence, should happen to exude Political in-correctness it would have been as well not to have bothered in the first place.

On the other hand a group of aspirants artists with an Application put together by some astute Art Advisor who knows the ropes can often be assured of an affirmative response. Success with Applications is an art in itself – something one needs to have been born with rather than learned.

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We will pass now from generalisations to the particular and to a particular exhibition which was, in fact, the fiat for this essay.

Entitled *CONFESS and CONCEAL – Eleven insights from Contemporary Australia and South-East Asia*, this exhibition is a fine example of Political Correctness in full flight and is by far the most impressive show ever initiated in and mounted by the Art Gallery of Western Australia. It represents a triumph for the present Gallery Directorship with its US originated policy “to educate and to draw (the benighted population of W.A. one presumes) into a global and wider Art perception and comprehension.”

This spectacle has been funded by the Australia Council via the International Promotions Committee of the Visual Arts. It has also received the blessing of the Australian Government’s Cultural Relations Branch, Department of Foreign

Affairs and Trade. It is political so it would have to be correct. Together with official government support the exhibition has also a Corporate Sponsor, for good measure, in the form of a leading West Australian legal firm with its sights set on an extension of its professional services into trendy SE Asia.

The Opening was a glittering social occasion and was performed by the newly elected State Premier – Richard Court – somewhat incongruously Carmen Lawrence, the former Labour Premier, having missed out in the recent hurly-burly. Several long speeches made reference to the good news that the exhibition would bring to the regions beyond our northern shores and to all the Art conscious (and, presumably, unconscious) people of the zone ... Applause.

Initially, the sight of 50 paintings – some of them very large – is impressive. It is on closer inspection that one experiences a feeling of let-down as the depressingly uniform and largely minimal content of the work itself comes through. Nor could one escape the feeling of having seen it all before — in magazines, in catalogues and in galleries here and overseas for at least the past 20 years. Almost without exception the underlying thread of the paintings themselves was that of variations on the themes of self-portraiture, autobiography, the sub-conscious, Women's issues along with the obligatory injection of Aboriginality.

It was not surprising then, with so much uniformity, that there was no telling which were the Australian paintings, which were by naturalised Asian artists living in Australia and which were the ones painted in South-East Asia itself. With only one exception all the artists were completely new names – fresh Discoveries. As to what they were confessing and what concealing was anyone's guess. Answers were left hanging in mid air.

The catalogue essays are gems of esoterica and, as well, reveal something of the larger aims of Political Correctness as it proceeds on its way to further enmesh and obfuscate the Art world generally. It would appear that “an international and a transnational meta-mega culture” is foreshadowed. In this nebulous world “artists transcend hierarchical ordering” by “anchoring their

work to the exploration of self-centrality” and “the validity of exploring and exploiting inner perspectives over externally prescribed agendas.”

These artists have no time for areas where “form is confused with content” but “where notions of identity, sexuality and gender are involved artists need not be mere reflectors of cultural conditioning but can become activists and fabricators not simply passive documenters ...” Read on – artists, at the same time, must find “a new optimism for Art based on the validity of Self.” And so on and so on ... There are some 20 odd pages of this. All the various organising personalities have their say.

We are led on to believe that it is through introspection and, seemingly, an ever conscientious contemplation of one’s navel, that we will find the right and Politically Correct path to a glorious all-embracing, transcendental, international mega-culture.

But what if Art proceeding along these lines were to have the effect of contracting rather than expanding? Might we not then be in danger of getting stuck with a world shrunk to a global village and ruled over by a Politically Correct but naked Emperor and his similarly attired Consort and retinue?

Having taken in the CONFESS and CONCEAL exhibition this becomes more than just a remote possibility.

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manuscript by Elizabeth Durack — 4 April 1993

footnote

did not send this piece to *Quadrant* as I originally thought I might and forgot all about it until tidying up desk and finding odd bits done on my Amstrad. It has dated in the ensuing 21 months but has possibilities – as a *How to ...* perhaps? ED — 27 January 1995

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