

VISUAL ARTS



Barbara Robertson, *Man with a Bowl*

Under the radar

Barbara Robertson

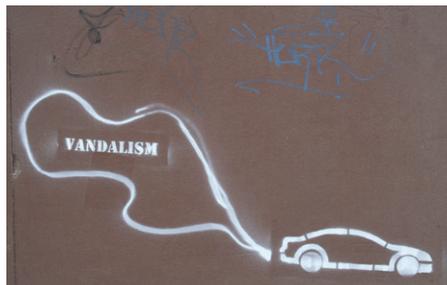
An Australian artist's life

By John Neylon

The Adelaide art community is probably divided into those who know Barbara Robertson's work and those who don't. To judge from the various endorsements of ex-students and associates of the artist, Barbara was a highly regarded art educator who invested much of her creative energy in her professional work, notably at Adelaide Girls High School in the early 1950s and at other metropolitan high schools. Her artistic training was rock solid. Her father, who was a highly talented amateur photographer, gave her every encouragement. The South Australian School of Art she studied at (1939-42) offered sound tuition and the experience of learning figurative skills under the acerbic tutelage of Ivor Hele. Fortunately, a local benefactor (Veta Macghey) allowed her to study at the National Gallery of Victoria Art School in the late 1940s. Here she was attracted to the tonal realism of the Max Meldrum-inspired school and studied painting under William Dargie. The

darker tonalities of much of her work can be traced to this experience. The ideological wars that had enlivened the Melbourne art scene of the 1940s may have subsided but the socially critical perspectives of artists, particularly Josl Bergner and Noel Counihan, reverberated and captured Robertson's imagination. This influence appears to be responsible for some remarkable images she produced when back in Adelaide and renting studio space off Grote Street in the early 1950s. They include *Backyard Grote Street*, a powerhouse ink and wash image of a dispirited old woman set against a grim background of washing and old workers' cottages. It is of great interest that this same setting is used for a work made in 1997, *Black Madonna and Child*, this time featuring an Aboriginal 'Mary' complete with halo and Christ child. Her dark-toned images of Aboriginal women in desperate urban settings have strong visual and emotional affinities with Josl Bergner's depictions of battlers and Aborigines cast as refugees walking the back streets of inner Melbourne.

With the Art Gallery of South Australia recently acquiring related works by Robertson the opportunity now exists to take a close look at common ground shared by Robertson and Jacqueline Hick. By 1954 Robertson's star was



ADELAIDE STENCIL

Stencil art has come to Adelaide and artists are out there making bold and usually political statements in our public spaces. The image above was snapped on a building hoarding on a site between Wymouth and Franklin Streets in May but its already gone, replaced by a new temporary fence to protect the public from the building site. Elsewhere, we have seen stencils of environmental and political slogans, images explaining the moral difference between driving cars and riding bicycles and a number of random images seemingly inspired by the UK artist Banksy (www.banksy.co.uk), the world's most famous stenciller. And the street art is not only in stencil form. People who saw the mock election posters for sports legend and broadcaster Graham Cornes must be wishing they'd had it framed. We appeal to these artists to leave behind the cloak of anonymity and contact us. We'd love to do a story on you.

on the rise. She exhibited in England with a Contemporary Art Society group (including Hick and Jeffrey Smart) and attracted favorable critical comment, described as a "somberly effective painter of sad humanity." Despite spreading her imaginative talents widely, including the extraordinary 1980s *St Francis Australis* series (featuring David Gulpilil as St Francis) the artist's foray into religious painting then relocating away from Adelaide to Carrickalinga in 1985 were factors in reducing the audience for her work to an inner circle of friends and associates. This recently published and elegantly designed book (with numerous spotlights on Adelaide art and cultural circles of the modern era) by Lorraine McLoughlin is a timely and comprehensive introduction to a significant but until recently, 'under the radar' Adelaide artist whose achievements and contribution, particularly her social-realist imagery of the 1950s-60s, deserves full recognition. Further information: robertsonbiography.com

NEW WORKS BY SA ARTISTS



Bunches of Flowers, Burnside Lorraine Lewitzka

TREVOR NEWMAN & LORRAINE LEWITZKA



Sung Cove, Kangaroo Island Trevor Newman

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Ian Abdulla, acrylic on board, 30 cm x 45 cm

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Flinders University Art Museum 4484

FLINDERS UNIVERSITY CITY GALLERY

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