

OPENING NIGHT SPEECH

Neridah Stockley: a retrospective
Charles Darwin University Art Gallery
12 November 2014

GUEST SPEAKER

Professor Brian Mooney
Head of School, School of Creative Arts & Humanities
Charles Darwin University



Good evening, I'm delighted to be graciously offered by Anita Angel the opportunity to say a few words to open this magnificent exhibition: *Neridah Stockley: a retrospective* here at CDU. Firstly, let me acknowledge on behalf of CDU that we are meeting in Larrakia Country and that we gratefully pay respect to all Larrakia elders past and present.

Thanks too to:

His Honour the Honourable John Hardy OAM, Administrator of the Northern Territory, and Mrs Marie Hardy for their presence at this celebration. Many of the luminaries of the Art world in the Northern Territory are here tonight including some who have travelled to the Top End from Alice Springs which is in itself a testament to the quality of Neridah's work. And of course my colleagues at CDU and the members of our broader community.

In some ways I feel like a charlatan because, while I have some understanding of philosophical aesthetics, I have not been trained in art appreciation. And so much of what I say this evening will be a philosophically inspired meditation from a very personal standpoint.

It has been claimed that the 18th century marks a watershed in the history of aesthetic speculation, that the new emphasis on taste led to a substitution of art for beauty as its central concept. As subjectivist theories of beauty began to assume prominence, philosophy narrowed its gaze to only those objects, namely works of art, whose status as beautiful objects could not be called into question. But if beauty is subjective, there is no point in calling art distinctively beautiful, or beautiful at all. Beauty is always and

everywhere objective even if we fail in given instances to appreciate it largely because of our own failures of understanding.

Yet if art and beauty must be clearly distinguished, the distinction invokes, and indeed is intermingled with the question of how they are associated and connected with each other. Tradition, as so often, may be our best guide. Contemporary aesthetics devotes much of its energy to investigations of aesthetic experience, by which is meant the experience of art – or, depending on the tradition, of the language used in talk about the arts. It is assumed and emphasised that the experience is unique, that art is unique, that none of the arts is reducible to any other or to anything else, that aesthetic concepts have a distinctive logic. Various functions and values are ascribed to art, and hence to the experience and description thereof; art is matter integrated into qualitative wholes; art is artefacts considered with respect to their design; art communicates insights, symbolises emotions, creates form; it can satirise and shock, extend the imagination, enlarge our sympathies and generate a community of sensibility.

All this is true in whole or in part; art is all this and does all this. Yet the traditional link between the artistic and the non-artistic, that both spheres together constitute the undifferentiated extension of the concept of beauty, has perhaps something of value also. The problem of art and society tends, amidst philosophical circles, to provoke a wary silence, and among utilitarians even fear; and the existence of natural beauty is, one suspects, felt to be a rather spiteful arrangement of things. But if the human encounter with art is to be saved, in the words of Ruby Meager, 'from that bleak autonomy that leads inexorably to its death', some connecting links must be found. Many, indeed, have been found by various thinkers, and art has been associated with play, with dreams, with the collective unconscious, with subconscious desires, with the dawning of consciousness etc. But all of these are psychological theories of art. They are concerned with the psychic energies that generate artistic production. They are singularly incapable of explaining aesthetic experience, of art and nature alike. Beauty is the only concept which appears to bestow upon art a place amid the furniture of the universe, to humanise it and overcome its growing alienation from our lives.

Beauty is ultimately spiritual. It realises the informal and the infinite within the formal – there is always something of mystery in beauty and works of art that are beautiful. From a purely metaphysical perspective the cosmic, or more particularly, the earthly function of beauty is to actualise the Platonic recollection of archetypes leading the soul ever upwards and at the same time inwards to the source of beauty. Art is what the Buddhists would call an *upaya* – a saving grace.

We see, or at least I do, some of these concerns in the art presented here tonight at this wonderful exhibition of Neridah's work.

Chronologically we see first the stirrings of the creative energies in an abstract (and I would even hazard the idea of 'naïve purity', if this is taken in a non-pejorative sense) delight in colour, but already nuanced and balanced. Later we move into the various landscapes, miniatures, and celebrations of the smaller more mundane, yet beauty bearing features of our world. We are taught by Neridah to look through the miniature form into the microcosm of beauty as it stirs in our own souls – her work internalises and then opens out into the vision of the Infinite – and through that to the source of beauty if only we had eyes to see what she sees so well. If my own preferences in these works turn towards the landscapes it is because here Neridah's work most clearly brings out both contemplative interiority and the invitation to move beyond the sometimes sparse and austere (but loved) vistas towards something that opens unto the infinite.

Returning to my opening comments on Beauty. According to our Indigenous brothers and sisters, just like the Indigenous Americans, virgin nature which is sacred and of unequalled beauty, contains every conceivable beauty. My impression on viewing this marvellous collection is that Neridah, much of her work done *en plein air*, understands this great truth and in her work invites us to see this truth with her.