



THEM THAR ASSOCIATES *by Ivor Francis*

When I accepted an invitation to open the recent Associates' exhibition and, later discuss some of the exhibitors' work with them at a Critic's Evening, my memories went back to that famous or, should I say, infamous Associates' exhibition of July, 1942.

It was an event for little ol' Adelaide to which you could have applied the description of a critic on a similar occasion in Paris nearly 70 years earlier when he wrote, "An exhibition has just opened at the Durand-Ruel Gallery. The inoffensive passer-by, attracted by the posters which decorate the frontage, enters and a strange sight strikes his astonished eyes; five or six lunatics, one of them a woman—a collection of unfortunates tainted by the folly of ambition—have met here to exhibit their works. Yesterday, an unlucky individual, leaving the exhibition, was arrested. He had begun to bite the passers-by."

Bettering this, the Adelaide exhibitors consisted of 43 lunatics, 14 of whom were women. Most of them were very young and all of them entirely unknown to the art world and public. Their names included, among others: S.A. (full list)—Shirley Adams, Viktor Adolfsson, Ronald C. Bell, Violet Buttrose, David Dallwitz, Tasman Fehlberg, Ivor Francis (Chairman of Associates), Nancy Hambidge, Jacqueline Hick, Shirley Keene, Charmain Kimber, Douglas Roberts, Jeff Smart and Ruth Tuck. Interstate—Jean Bellette, W. Bergner, Arthur Boyd, Wolfgang Cardamatus, Noel Counihan, Rah Fizelle, W. Frater, James Gleeson, Elaine Haxton, Paul Haefliger, Sali Herman, Sidney Nolan, V. G. O'Connor, Carl Plate, Albert Tucker and Eric Wilson.

Work by Dobell (still eighteen months before his name was to become famous as a result of the now historic Archibald Prize affair) and Margaret Preston were vetoed out in a last-minute stand by the Council on the grounds that it was of Fellows' standard. So it was hidden behind the curtain, between the gallery and Council Room, and furtively shown, on request, to visitors who had been tipped off about it. In short, the premier showing of these and other future world-renowned Australian artists was entirely due to the initiative of Associates of the Royal S.A. Society of Arts.

The exhibition caused an uproar, in its way quite equal to anything achieved by current anti-Vietnam war marches. It remained a fourteen-day wonder. It produced over 24 letters to the Press, a leader in "The Advertiser", numerous columnist comments, questions in Parliament reported in the press and Hansard followed by alleged disciplinary and intimidatory action by the Education Department against art-teacher exhibitors. The "Southern Cross" devoted over two columns to the exhibition and the S.A. Teachers' Journal put out a "Special Art Number".

H. E. Fuller, "The Advertiser" art critic (and Honorary Secretary of the Society) wrote, "It's been threatened for a long time and it's come at last. Art has passed through many phases, and has come to a stage which perhaps defies adequate words for description." Later in the review he ponders, "Sidney Nolan's 'Landscape With Train' causes one to wonder if the artist has sent in his palette in error". And of Albert Tucker, "In figure work his 'Self Portrait' is not flattering and one is surprised that an artist has ventured to so show himself". This grotesque portrait, with its enormous eyes staring balefully at the visitor as he entered the gallery, was regarded by all of us as the *tour de force* of the exhibition.

"Palette" (M. J. McNally), art critic of "The News", commented, "I felt completely at sea in contemplating these fearful and wonderful effusions. To me they are entirely inexplicable". But, in a follow-up article, he qualified his earlier comments with, "Visitors who have attended the exhibition of contemporary artists at the Institute Gallery, while not all attracted by the subject-matter of the pictures, must surely allow that in the matter of technical painting some of the work is really excellent".

Cause for the 1942 Associates' exhibition arose from two groups of grievances which amounted to one grievance, namely, that neither the minority group of contemporary-minded, art-school-trained Associates nor the majority group of hopeless amateurs could get their works accepted for Society exhibitions which mainly existed, at that time, for selling the conventional works of established members.

By hoodwinking the amateur majority into giving their support, but without telling them or the Society of their wily scheme, the contemporary minority persuaded the Council to let them organise their own Associates' exhibition.

To achieve their plans in secrecy, they outnumbered and manoeuvred the always badly-attended Annual General Meeting to put through a motion, which actually became incorporated for a short time in the Rules of the Society, permitting Associates to elect their own committee, Chairman, selection committee and representative on Council. Needless to say, the Rule was swiftly rescinded at an indignant mass meeting of Society members at the first opportunity following the exhibition. As for the poor, duped amateurs, all of whose work was ruthlessly

rejected by their own specially appointed selection committee, well, less said the better.

The 1942 "First Exposition, Royal S.A. Society of Arts Associate Contemporary Group Exhibition" (to give it its full title) was, I believe, a genuine attempt by the moderates among the contemporary rebels to reform the Society and bring it up to date in the face of strong representations by a more militant section in the contemporary art community, some of whom were not members of the Society, to set up another society in opposition.

However, the success of the exhibition, the rescinding of the new Associates' ruling, the Council's strategy in removing main "trouble-makers" from the Associates by making them Fellows, and the obvious lack of any change of heart in the Society as a whole, precipitated no further wavering in support of the embryonic Contemporary Art Society.

At that time, those Associates who had been "rewarded" by Fellowships, exerted their efforts to get themselves elected to Council for the sole object of seeing that the newly-formed society's applications for the Society of Arts' gallery were duly processed. It was the only suitable gallery available in Adelaide for major exhibitions.

Looking at this latest 1971 Associates' show of independence which I, now an ancient Fellow, was given the privilege and honour of selecting, I could only feel that our exercise in 1942 had not been altogether without effectiveness within the Society, and that the kind of amateurism which then existed has no parallel among Associates today.

Probably, if an avant-garde of contemporaries was to succeed in bringing off the same kind of coup again, all the work recently shown in the 1971 exposition would be rejected. One thing, however, was quite clear to me—quite a lot would have been selected for the 1942 show.

Art Prize of \$2,500 to honour the occasion of Tenth International Congress of Accountants, which by courtesy of N.S.W. Gallery will hold its reception there on Monday, October 16, 1972 when the winner will be announced.

The prize will be awarded for landscape or seascape. The competition will close at 5 p.m., October 2, 1972, by which hour all entries should be delivered to N.S.W. Gallery, Sydney. Entry forms may be obtained from all State and leading provincial galleries.

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