

Finishing School

Apparently there's a trend in the Melbourne art scene. People are graduating from art school in Canberra, hanging around for a couple of years and then moving to Melbourne. Armed with only their futon and a CV hot off the printer ('Artist - previous exhibitions at Canberra School of Art Graduating Exhibition and Canberra Contemporary Art Space Manuka') they go boldly forth. But what is their mission? Infiltration? Assimilation? Or domination? These are not isolated incidents. The shocked tones of 'Oh, are they from Canberra, too' as someone makes the inevitable discovery are becoming familiar.

This is the story of one such group.

It was the end of the summer of '98. It was a beautiful day. I was wearing a pair of green slacks (Scanlan and Theodore I believe) and a crisp white shirt. The sky was a brilliant blue and I remember it was warm. How, in recent years I have forgotten what summer used to feel like, the feel of the sun actually warming your skin, those musical noises that birds used to make and the sweet sweet air of a planned city.

It was my first day in the painting department. From here on I was to build friendships with my peers that would last until this very day.

Kezia was my best friend. We met the year before in foundation studies and with our intellects combined we would do rebellious things together like skip class to go to the gym or the health food co-op to buy figs and brazil nuts.

Every year the workshop had a painting party where we were required to dress up as a painting. Geoff, of course, had his Mondrian suit with matching crash helmet. Noel went as one of Picasso's ladies, with green paint down her nose.

But I will always remember Kezia covered in blue paint as one of Yves Klein's models greeted by only a series of dumb looks as no one could work out who she was.

Geoff was the guy who walked around the painting department looking like he owned it (he had short hair back then). He even rode a skateboard for a while and he painted the classics - guns, porn and men with bulging trousers.

I have to admit I found his early work pretty effective. That and his ability to carry large canvases on his head while riding his bike. Legend has it that the only reason he got into art school was because he was from Yackandandah. The assessors remembered him only due to his obscure birthplace.

Noel will always be remembered as a 'maverick' - so termed one crit session by our head of workshop. And the time she was told the colors she was using were repulsive.

Noel was one of those artists, who would always dress like her work. Like a manga character - lots of pinks, yellows, blacks and greens, and big boots. She

was 'good value' because she would actually talk in tutorials, even answer a question or simply offer an opinion.

When Justin arrived in third year he carried a black doctor's bag. He was there to lift the tone and rouse us from the apathy induced by eighteen hundred thousand hours of life drawing classes and painting lessons.

(I'd had an older sister who went to VCA, thought I had a fairly good idea of what to expect at art school, then never really did get over the indignity of suffering those classes in the first place.)

Justin wowed us with his theory, his tonal gradations, and his straight straight lines.

Bryan was a couple of years above me at art school - he had a studio down the road with Geoff and Kirsten. For some strange reason they were all into actually listening to electronic music. Expect for Kirsten who drove a ute.

Quentin and Michael were a couple of years below the rest of and how they ended up part of our incredibly elite group I don't really know. Maybe it was due to the sheer quality of their work.

I first met them at a workshop party where they were DJing. In retrospect I'm sure they were just playing CDs but at the time I was prepared to believe they really could mix some phat beats.

Stuart was in the print media and drawing department and belonged to our group through the most lateral of means - by going out with Noel. He was a fan of the double denim and had trashy parties at his house.

And so there we all lived and studied, in that little green oasis, four hours from Sydney, eight hours from Melbourne. We had lakeside studios and group houses in O'Connor. On graduating we got jobs at NGA, the NPG, CCAS, CMAG, anywhere we could abbreviate. For a while Kezia and I lived over the back fence from Justin and Geoff. A few planks of wood had been kicked in so we could pass from garden to garden without walking round the block. We rode bikes everywhere and at night the sky was pitch black, the stars were bright and it was quiet.

But there was trouble in this paradise. People got out. They had gone to Melbourne and come back with these crazy stories.

'Some boy wonder won this prize and got given a hundred grand. Now he's got nine female assistants working for him.'

'Nobody even uses canvas in Melbourne. They just throw shit on the floor, make stuff out of felt, wool, cardboard, whatever, portraits out of fuckin' texta colours.'

I went to this show at this place called Gertrude Street



and everyone was wearing chunky belts. And not just black ones, but like white and red, all sorts of colors.'

And here we were painting. On canvas, using brushes.

We had spent the whole of second year copying still lifes for God's sake. We actually knew what to do with rabbit skin glue. We were shown how to make our own gesso.

And what's more, some of us were even painting abstracts...

"I woke up with a painting in mind – loads of washes of dark greens over a bright white base – like a slimy swamp monster type affair. Anyways, I fucked that one up halfway through – the paint wasn't mixed, too many lumps in the jam."

— Geoff Newton 6/01/02

And some of us were even making landscapes...

"My work is about the place where nature and culture collide."

— Artist Statement by miscellaneous Canberra School of Art student 2000

Yeah, so that's a particularly bad – well, terrible – artist statement.

But hey, that's the thing about Canberra, it's so darn pretty and so utterly peaceful that you stay there too long, you end up making pictures about the changing colors of the autumn leaves. (Bet they never did find that place of collision either.)

So we moved. First Brian in 2001, then Noel, then

May 2002. Left to right: Kezia Geddes, Madeleine Kidd, Justin Andrews. Photo: Stuart Bailey.

Geoff in 2002, then Noel moved back, then I moved down, then Justin in 2003, then Quentin, and once again Noel, and Kezia.

And for a while the scene seemed so big, so exotic, so alluring.

Openings were ablaze with vibrant colors, three quarter length trousers teamed with tunic tops, printed skirts, and shrunken knits.

This was contrasted with a look unmistakably shabby-chic that shouted out 'Hey, I spend my money on art supplies'. Elegantly disheveled, understated, but on closer inspection always rewarding.

There was a spirit of individualism linked by a common belief in layering, a strong use of irony and intelligent aesthetics. There was drinking, there was smoking and even works of art.

I could see that if we were going to get anywhere it was really time to start accessorizing.

Cut to the second week of August 2004.

Tuesday night opening, Justin Andrew at Seventh Gallery, Gertrude Street; Wednesday night Geoff Newton opening 24/7, Flinders Street; Thursday night Bryan Spier, Westspace, Anthony Street.

So most of us have been here for a couple of years now. But have we really assimilated?

The graffiti in the female toilets at Troika certainly suggests that Bryan has: 'Bryan Spier, the art tart, he broke my heart.'



And as I sit in my inner city studio – where Sebastian is stretching a canvas by the window, his face bathed in the soft light of the afternoon sun, and Eliot painting a background in the corner gently humming to himself – I wonder.

Am I glad I moved?

As if in answer, Hans comes in with the afternoon coffees. “I’m sorry I took so long but I couldn’t remember if you wanted a latte or a flat white so I got you both. And would you like us to do some overtime again tonight?”

I take a sip and get back to work.

Mixed Business is a group show of Justin Andrew, Michael Ascroft, Stuart Bailey, Madeline Kidd, Geoff Newton, Noel Skrzypczak, Bryn Spier and Quentin Sprague opening at Seventh Gallery, Melbourne on October 26, 2004.

Kezia decided she wanted a job and is currently studying curatorship at Melbourne Uni.

Stuart and Michael are still living in Canberra tied down to good jobs and family. Stuart says he wants to move. Michael is not so sure, still thinks he can be an individual...

Madeline Kidd is a painter who has forgotten how to do anything else, including simple conversation and cooking. She has a team of nine male assistants.

May 2002. Left to right: Amelia Stuparich, Justin Andrews, Noël Skrzypczak, Stuart Bailey. Photo: Geoff Newton.
