

Art Quarterly
Volume 17 Number 3
Autumn
March 1980
Price \$5.75

Geoffrey Proud
Richard Crichton
Dale Hickey
Virginia Cuppaidge
The Heidelberg School
Restoration of Rosedale
and others

ART

AND AUSTRALIA



RICHARD CRICHTON 'PARADE' WITH 'VETERAN'
(detail) (1974-78)
Terra cotta and painted plaster 92 cm
Possession of the artist
Photograph by John Bolton

Betty Clarke Richard Crichton



Richard Crichton is a remarkable person — he is also a remarkable artist. His work quite clearly reflects the man himself and the influences to which he has been exposed over four or so decades.

In 1960, a comparatively short time after completing his formal education at the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology, Crichton held his first exhibition at Gallery A, Melbourne. The paintings and drawings shown in this exhibition were concerned with man's estate but the natural forms were already extended and distorted towards the freer pattern of abstraction.

Crichton's early vision was governed by a personal consciousness of the elemental factors of earth and sea and, a distinctive theme in Australian painting, of the isolated figure in the landscape. His work is distinguishably Australian, the earlier paintings showing influences of Dubuffet, Tapiés, Klee, Nolan and Tucker, and Crichton acknowledges an early interest in the decorative totemic symbolism of Australian Aboriginal art — forms that are associated with aspects of life. He has also been much interested in the prehistoric cave drawings of France and Spain.

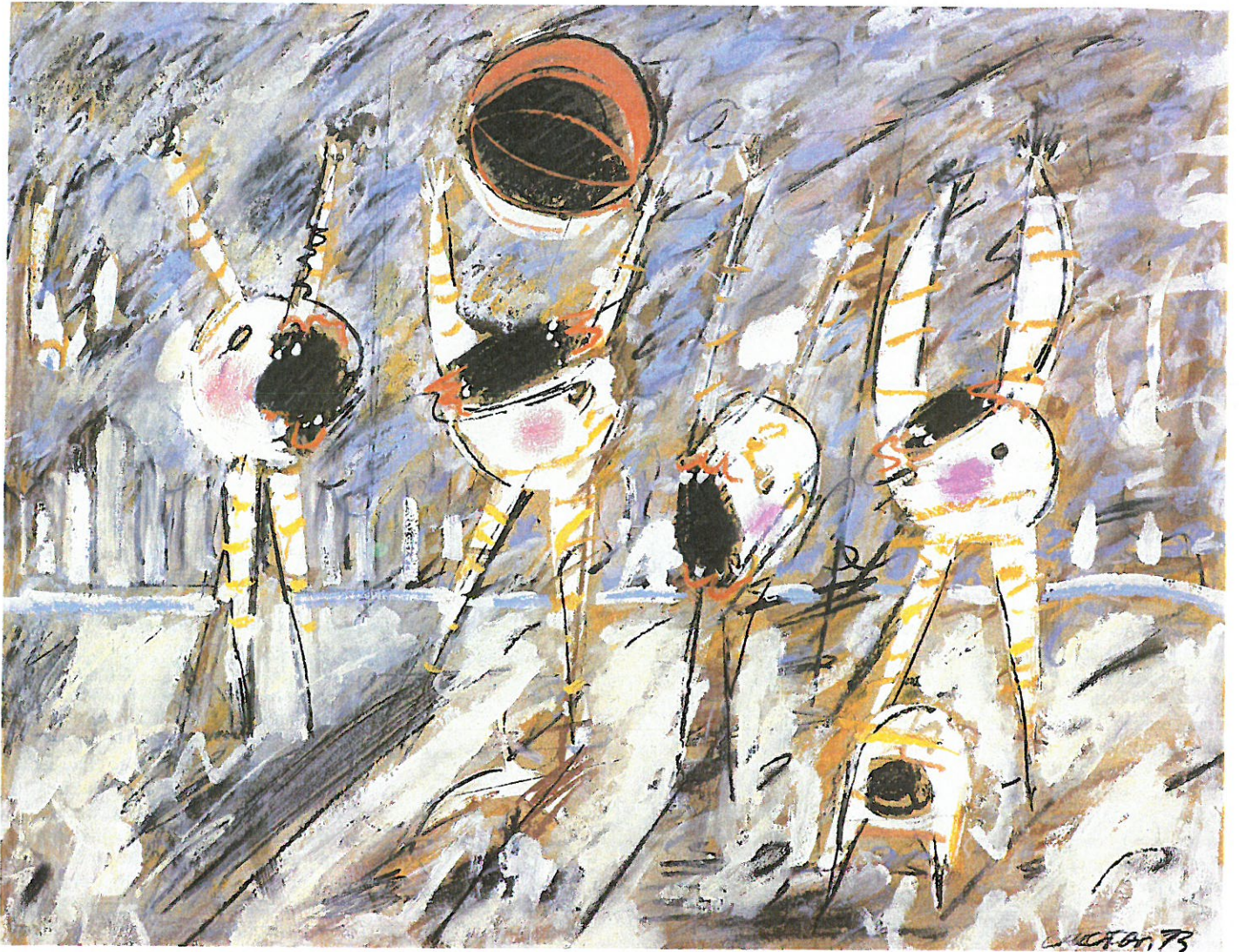
Crichton has absorbed and used both natural forces and formal motives as dialectic components of his art. He has created evocative symbols and forms but there is a latent polarization, a sense of conflict and tension threading through the imagery in his work from the early years to the present: a duality of symbols and duality of approach. His handwriting has always been a searching out of a personal imagery, a running of elements into a picture which only sometimes achieves the 'full meaningful thing'.¹

The imagery evident in that first show has remained through twenty years of

painting, subtly rediffused or harshly re-imposed. We find it in the paintings of the middle 1960s when he showed twice at the Bonython Art Gallery, Adelaide, in 1965 and 1967, a monumental series: sentinels, totems, birds, figures by the sea — imagery difficult to accept on a literal level but with an individual quality of art and maintaining an innate consciousness of primitive decoration. In these paintings he was not so much experimenting with the picture space, rather concentrating on his own recurring themes and repeating patterns. At times his painting became weird, cutting, hard and aggressive; his preferred subconscious images, his references from the past and ideas which 'had to be worked out'² have always caused Crichton considerable frustrations, and particularly so at this period. Nevertheless, fine work was produced and several important paintings were purchased for major collections.³

In 1967 Crichton was awarded the Harkness scholarship and with it the chance to travel for two years and to move away from his self-imposed isolation in Melbourne into New York and the excitement of a great city. In New York he was immediately surprised and excited by the volume of people in the streets. He was particularly stimulated by the parades with their marching girls and musical instruments, which seemed to him symbolic of the current political unrest. During this period he was a constant visitor to the Museum of Modern Art and the other great galleries where he became aware of Picasso and Pollock, Francis Bacon and the Surrealists. In so far as it is possible to distinguish between the form of a work of art and the spirit that informs it, these influences led him to the development of one of the essential elements of his current art

RICHARD CRICHTON TRUGANINI (1976)
Painted plaster and terra cotta 46 cm
Possession of the artist
Photograph by John Bolton



RICHARD CRICHTON SUMMER RETURN 1973
Pastel 46 cm x 58 cm
The Australian National Gallery, Canberra

— the use of hollow images and pipe forms, which followed his observation of the parades.

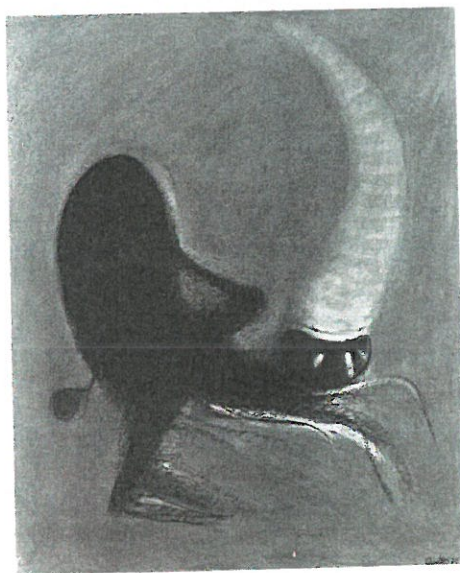
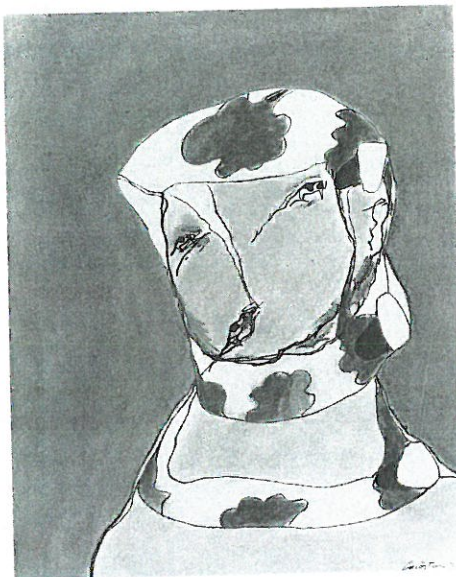
This new creative ferment and the growth of a style as individual as his thinking led to a series of paintings based on the processions, a synthesis of all the new impressions combined with Crichton's own pictorial vocabulary. He produced an energetic series of works, the product of his imagination and an intense curiosity for the new forms. He pulled them apart and put them together again; they became strange images with trumpet heads, trombone heads and hollow pipe heads, Surrealist people losing contact with reality but still retaining the bands of totemic marking.

Crichton seriously feels that this 'marking' of his figures is innate to his latent thoughts of the Aborigines and ancient civilizations. It would appear to be a linking theme between the new ideas, which continually supersede the past — but artists should not be asked for explanations. As Mark Boyle has said 'you are asked for purposes when you are learning that purpose is not going to emerge ever. And you are asked for a statement of intent when the head seethes with all your fluctuating statements of the past instantly and meticulously taken down and which you use constantly, with increasing derision, in evidence against yourself'.⁴

Crichton's work is not always accepted, because people can be suspicious of change; but he likes probing, to gather in a presence in a picture, to put it into another format, and to improvise and experiment.

The Summer Return pastels, exhibited at Macquarie Galleries in 1976, evolved from the unreal and mysterious parade figures.⁵ They were constructed in abstract shapes, reflecting the fantastic and the mystical, and they were sensitively and feelingly drawn. It is Crichton's nature to introduce different subjects and, in some measure, his success is due to the fact that he has achieved their acceptance.

Crichton's experiments with form led him, on his return to Australia, to begin another important series of paintings and drawings based on his close observation of cows. In addition to firing his imagination, the cow provided him with a subject in which the elements of previous ideas were sustained — that is to say, the monumentality and the configuration of patterns, the subjective though often abstracted forms and the use of Surrealist imagery. True to his previous experiences in New York, he



let the cow pictures dominate his thinking — no longer marching girls, but cows. Cows static, cows abstracted to fill a canvas, hollow cows, cubist cows, real cows. An original approach to a simple subject used to make witty observations about related forms in the manner of his attack on the marching girls of the New York parades, though not so acknowledged by Crichton.

It is possible that when Crichton moves away from the intensity of his own thoughts his mastery of his art is more evident, for a while his hand is not at variance with his mind. His prolonged study of the cow put him into a state of receptivity and he was able to absorb and exploit the principles of composition that are outstanding in the series. Obviously, he could give the cows a greater measure of observation than had been possible with parade *oeuvres*.

To Crichton it was natural to move from the parade and cow images to the actual use of pipes for building a parade sculpture; he again acted intuitively and the jagged patterns and totemic emblems of the parade series were transferred to terracotta pipes.

If these figures echoed Crichton's New York experiences, his later terracotta sculptures show a return to his feeling for an older civilization, this time with the vanished Tasmanian Aborigines. His head of Truganini, the last full-blood Tasmanian, reveals a deep compassion and involvement in the tragedy of her life, and his sculpture, the *Farewell ballet*, is a summing-up of his artistic feeling in view of his revised awareness of the past. In her review of Crichton's retrospective exhibition at the Melbourne University Art Gallery in 1978, Memory Holloway remarks that '...in the *Farewell ballet* the imagery transcends Crichton's past work. It now intrudes into one's own personal space, borders on theatre in its dramatic configuration of raised spears and the bodies marked for war'. Also, in this exhibition were drawings of Truganini's head, a series in which the gradual elimination of the sad face into the paper embodied his deep awareness of her personal tragedy.

Crichton's kangaroo drawings of that period are presented as portraits, although the distinctive shape of the animal is not exaggerated to stress its character, which is built on the delicate modelling of the form. These drawings are subjective portraits of kangaroos; they are decorative and often

amusing and are certainly among the most enjoyable of his recent works.

Does Crichton really 'prefer the subconscious things to come out'?⁶ He says that 'often things from the past are triggered — you have no control over it, you must see it through'. I believe that the duality of his work, the conscious subjectivity and the subconscious eruption of ideas, which need such a struggle to reach their final form, will continue to provide Richard Crichton with what might be called environmental bands. Already, the pure forms of the first kangaroo drawings are elaborated, they are not relaxed portraits of animals but anguished portraits of people. Crichton is not interested in the safe bet, he moves forward, fully aware of his difficulties and certain of the human significance of his images.

This man has a future in Australian art. Favoured with an original mind and a technical ability of some weight, his work to come should be anticipated with much interest.

¹Richard Crichton 1979.

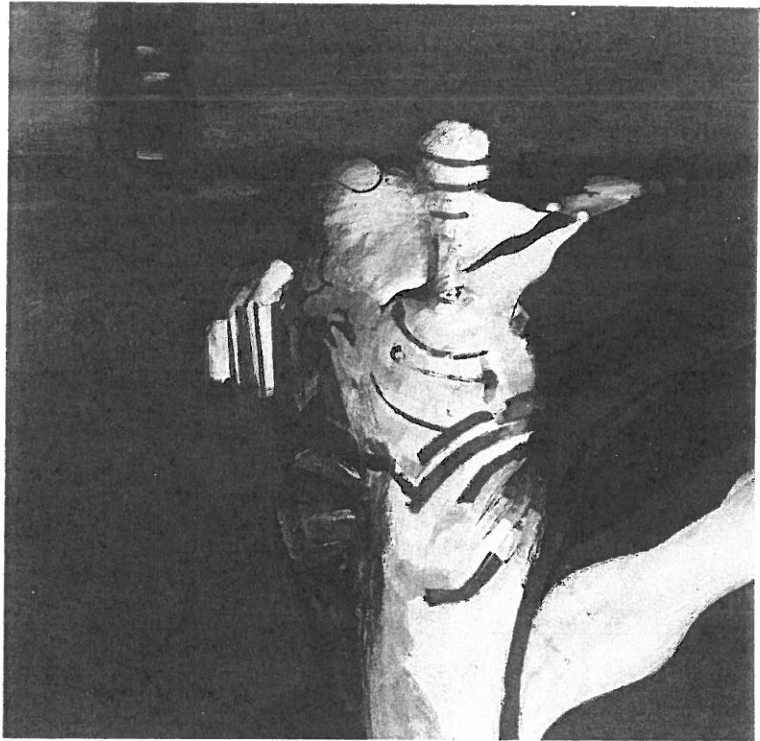
²*ibid.*

³*The Sentinel*, acquired by the Mertz Collection, 1965; *Study for the Sentinel*, acquired by the University of Melbourne, Ormond College Collection, 1965.

⁴*Art Anglesi Oggi 1960-76*, British Council/Commune di Milano 1976.

⁵Two pastels from this series acquired by the Australian National Gallery, 1976.

⁶Richard Crichton 1979.



opposite top

RICHARD CRICHTON HEAD WITH COWS 1971
Pastel 63 cm x 50 cm
Possession of the artist

Photograph by John Bolton

opposite bottom

RICHARD CRICHTON KANGAROO DANCE 1979
Conte drawing 102 cm x 81 cm
Possession of the artist

Photograph by John Bolton

above right

RICHARD CRICHTON VIGIL 1968
Oil on canvas 152 cm x 137 cm
Possession of the artist

Photograph by John Bolton

right

RICHARD CRICHTON FIGURE — USA 1967
PVA on canvas 122 cm x 122 cm
Possession of the artist

Photograph by John Bolton