

RICHARD CRICHTON

"FAREWELL BALLET"

by Jenny Zimmer

AT MACQUARIE GALLERIES, SYDNEY, 1980

Most of these works on paper, hardboard and canvas have not been shown before. Many suggest subtle new variations in Richard Crichton's thinking - or rather intuiting. This artist follows no ordered procedure or programme. The images, though somewhat restricted by his range of personal symbols, just spill out of his ever active imagination. The following remarks embody some of my reactions to his recent paintings.

I immediately noticed that they are mostly made in a curiously high-keyed and airily light colour range. The pearly pinks, silvery blues and buttery beiges, together with musty yet fresh creams, yellows and terracottas create a beautifully evocative effect that defies close analysis. The colours are, like this country, aged, yet at the same time fresh and new. They are not those antique colours, grimed by dust and time, which have become associated with some Australian landscape painting - nor are they the earthy ochres of Aboriginal bark paintings. Instead they are often fugitive and silvery like mirages which elusively renew themselves in the distance, or they are richly substantial and to my mind best described in terms of exotic spices like cinnamon, saffron, cardamon and turmeric. The difficulty of talking about the singularly successful use of colour in painting was well known to Ludwig Wittgenstein who mused thus -

"Let us imagine that someone were to paint something from nature and in its natural colours. Every bit of the surface of such a painting has a definite colour. What colour? How do I determine its name?"

L. Wittgenstein, Remarks on Colour III.68.

Crichton's colours are inspired by the strange ephemeral effects of light over the Australian landscape, particularly in the Kimberley Ranges of the north of Western Australia.

The new work is more painterly than it has been for some years. Outlines and shapes are soft, luscious, undulating like the long softly textured contours of kangaroos or the delicate curves of primordial landforms. The artist's flicks and dots document his instinctive responses to the delicate marks made on the landscape by its silent and shifting populations of Aborigines and kangaroos - through time immemorial.

'Primal Dance' is a key painting in this show. It pulses with nascent life-force: just observe the vibrant expanding hue around the navel of the biomorphic bird-man spirit which hovers above the coupled kangaroos. Though not yet a defined species these animals dance pre-existentially like the mythical Mimi people painted by Aboriginal ancestors in Arnhem Land. The space in which they float must be taken to represent the spacious, treeless opulence of this country; an opulence most Australians understand but cannot describe. 'Primal Dance' is one of the most joyous paintings I have seen for a long time.

Although very new, paintings like 'Primal Dance' and 'Primal Landscape' seem logically prior to those works of recent years in which Crichton has been concerned with the death and destruction of both Aborigines and kangaroos. He seems to emphatically re-introduce shapes and marks which

have lingered in his repertoire of highly personal symbols. What is new is the confident optimism of the context. The dominant outlines, the harsh black and white and primary coloured contrasts seem abandoned for the time being. These we associate with the images of dramatic conflict between the original inhabitants and the European newcomers that have occupied Crichton for some years. Now there is a sense of a subtle and personal interpretation of the 'promise' of the land. This confident belief in the bountiful and regenerating qualities of the land was also captured in the most striking Aboriginal bark-paintings, and in the painted rock galleries of Northern Australia.

In works like 'Danse Macabre I' we see the previously ordered ranks of troopers and Aborigines fall into disarray. The familiar symbols, woomera flicks, crests, eyes, beaks, rifles and colourful uniforms are cast at random into a confused and chaotic heap. It is as if the cryptic 'Ballet' has reached its frenetic finale and Aborigines, troopers and kangaroos have become interchangeable. All are locked into the struggle for survival together. Yet, over all, the 'wheel of life' seems to preside, triumphant. Menace dissolves into the perpetual cycle of the 'dance of life'. The reds and blues of the soldiers uniforms give way to the colours of that natural order imposed on the Australian by his environment.

Such paintings, modified though they may be, still invoke the chill terror of lost identity and the threat of extinction. Taken pessimistically, kangaroo and aborigine become synonymous symbols of painful loss. With his persuasive skills Crichton edges these images into our consciousness; then they do their work and unleash bitter feelings of regret. But, taken optimistically, we can already feel a new order forming itself. It is based on a confidence that tradition and values are strong, older than history, and can be depended upon.

There are, however, several completely painful and appalling pictures in this exhibition. We experience directly the pall of death and disease with surrounds the remains of the deserted leprosarium on Little Palm Island, off the coast of North Queensland. The marks of tragedy and despair are traced out in spindly lines and frantic gestures painted in sickly pinks, mauves and yellows. Seeing these abandoned beds was an experience the artist literally ran from. He has partly expurgated it from his memory by painting it - but still likes to keep these pictures turned to the wall. The chill menace of this subject triggered Crichton's abundant imagination.

Susan Sontag has written that, "Real art has the capacity to make us nervous. By reducing the work of art to its content and then interpreting that, one tames the work of art. Interpretation makes art manageable, conformable." (Against Interpretation, 1964). The works in this exhibition do make one nervous and excited. I have therefore avoided reading as much as one might into the extremely rich symbolic allusions, nor have I elaborated on Crichton's position as a contemporary primitivist. Instead I have attempted a description of the appearance of the work, particularly in terms of its colours and forms and the feelings they evoke.

Crichton captures the spirit of our land in the way our best poets, writers and musicians do. He reinforces its myths, and embellishes them.