Richard Crichton

Richard Crichton's name should be on a short list as one of the most under-rated artists in Australian modern painting.

Others on such a list would have had, like Crichton, enthusiastic critical support at some time and perhaps the patronage of a few connoisseurs in this and other countries. Unfortunately, it's easier to embrace celebrity reputations rather than to engage with less familiar but equally formidable talents.

Difficult to categorize, his paintings are mostly valued and understood by people lucky enough to own them, because until quite recently there were long periods when he did not exhibit. This has had the advantage of allowing the artist to work with more creative freedom, at the risk of courting obscurity.

He started early. In short pants, he turned up at George Bell's to learn how to be an artist. Sympathetic, Bell told him to come back in a few years. Later, and still a boy, Richard went doggedly to Arthur Boyd's studio on a similarly naive mission. Boyd, always generous, showed him how to mix some paint, but the real revelations for Richard were in the Boyd paintings.

Long before he'd heard of Tapies or Dubuffet, Crichton improvised without inhibition, using whatever stuff was cheap and available: sand and PVA for a dry texture, commercial pigment. In 1986, in a review about his show at the Powell Street Gallery, I thought it relevant to quote from a letter by Emile Zola to his friend Cezanne in which he wrote that an artist was really both poet and workman; you were born a poet and then became a workman. I thought then, and still do, that Crichton's typically Celtic poetic streak is well served, and still is, by an obsessive creative energy.

The fresh look of his more familiar works is to do with the visual surprise he brings to everything. No formula, no cliché, just strange conjunctions and collisions between the inner vision and the external world, all brought together to make a compelling unity, if not always a comfortable harmony. He is the classical example of a visual thinker.

Crichton is a prodigiously gifted draughtsman. His animal drawings have the air of creatures observed by someone who has never seen cows or kangaroos before; and he makes the animals look just as baffled as if it's their first view of people. Crichton has worked his way into their heads. You can see the effect in that wide and bright eloquence of the eyes that pop half-fearful, half-fascinated, from the amoebic undulations of black and white patterned cattle.

In these cow pictures, the animals are always identified as individual (the kangaroos have spirits) rather than merely generic creatures. Formal invention adds to the tension by the way their surface description gives way to a marvellous abstract play of object and void, line and mass, with just enough specific detail to make the contrast between reality and phantasy startling. Those strangely pendulous white shapes begin as sky but become more assertive as objects as they dribble down like thick cream over the cows.

The starting points for Crichton's original visions have been traced by various critics to ideas about different sorts of alienation, Aboriginal displacement, life by the sea, wartime camouflage props, the ceremonials and rituals of Arnhemland; about the survival of both art and life in spite of the unsettling disjunctions between the one and the other; about shared destinies. Many other artists have made respectable careers from some of those also.
But of course themes by themselves, however potentially interesting and fruitful, guarantee nothing by way of quality. If they are simply illustrative programmes, they fail as art.

For Crichton, they are used as creative triggers for excursions into the inner life. They are the excuse to invent and assemble his visual magic around and beyond them. His response to such themes and experiences has always been primarily intuitive, something to hang the real picture on; something often surreal, mysterious, unconscious; unaccounted for in the end because the real motives and origins are deep-seated and intensely personal, only ever referred to obliquely.

Part of the creative imagery comes from his evident need to offer different protective devices to insulate his figures from trouble. Rather like the way Mozart helpfully provides a magic flute and a set of bells as protection against the various trials and dangers that lurk in his opera, Crichton introduces disguises, shields, umbrellas, masks, tents and helmets that symbolically guard against life's more threatening moments. The armoured metallic surfaces of a few works here underline the point.

But no matter what deep imperatives may drive the work, Crichton always makes it a communication rather than a soliloquy. He brings particular places and times to his images.

Some early works in the exhibition, never publicly shown before, come from the depths of the studio. Some will be seen for the first time, some relate to his couple of years in New York when he lived and worked among interesting artists, including the other Australians Kevin Connor and Brett Whiteley. Some of the better-known Americans, such as Ellsworth Kelly and Roy Lichtenstein called occasionally.

You could reasonably expect that the potent artistic cocktail of Abstract Expressionism and the looming example of Pollock and Rothko in the turbulent American 'sixties might have been crucial for a young painter on a Harkness Fellowship. Possibly; but more relevant might have been the social circumstances of political conflict, protest, racial tension and the attendant visual dramas of the street : marches, parades of various kinds; the sheer look and feel of New York.

For example, in the NY-NY Parade series, we get signs and abbreviations (they share the same abstract territory as Miro and Klee) that catch the festive glitter and movement of a city carnival atmosphere; marching girls, bands, mobile theatre.

In some we are persuaded to see the glint of a cheer-leader's pasted-on smile, the decorative flourish of chevron and epaulette, the enticing flash of a skirt and the uniform twirling of batons. Sharp colour suggests a brassy blare of sound. Still, Crichton's bright red droplets have ominous associations, so it would not be surprising if a nostalgic Veterans' Day march suddenly turned ugly.

In NY-NY 5 you see what made Mondrian paint his staccato Broadway Boogie-Woogie; Crichton reacted to the place in much the same way, the experience filtered through his quite different temperament. Klee famously invented a series of unplayable painted notations about music and, of course, abstract painters have long ago given visual art the same autonomy and freedom from literal description that music takes for granted. So Crichton must find his own musical equivalents: colour for sound, space for silence, and dissonant intervals between for the more disturbing portents.

The musical analogies are perhaps not incidental. Richard Crichton's mother, who died when he was eleven, was an accomplished pianist, so music seems to have been a constant childhood background. Perhaps more significantly, his first pictures were made with the paintbox that she left him, and one of her own pictures (a sailing ship under a reflected moon) has been evocatively echoed in an important series of ship paintings exhibited in 2002.

His first New York paintings still look a bit Australian, but the earlier muted and heavily textured surfaces change to a more conventional use of oil paint. His more obvious symbolic legacies from Australia are, for example, those disembodied eyes-on-stalks that seem to have detached themselves from Nolan's and Tucker's bush scapes and helpfully floated over to Crichton's New York in support, only to find themselves gazing rather bemused at the New Yorkers looking back at them and trying to work them out.

These eerie exchanges of eyes recur in many subsequent works. In later paintings, eyes and faces are sometimes masked, hooded or disguised behind various shelters and barriers, transformed into totemic effigies that give the impression of occupying a more remote time and space. The artist's fascination with some ancient Aboriginal imagery that he discovered during long excursions into distant Australia starting in the seventies, has found its way into many Crichton paintings, though, unlike many artists who have made superficial decorative use of Aboriginal motifs, he has never relied on wholesale borrowing of someone else's sacred dreaming; he has too much authentic dreaming of his own to cope with.

As an aside, it's odd now to see in that same first American painting of the hypnotic eyes , Entry New York, and in another of the same series where there appears a dark parade of figures against two skyscrapers, the weirdly prophetic suggestion of flying objects colliding with towers, long before the twin towers even existed.

Crichton's most private and emotional references to what were then the most public American tragedies are the two paintings, Requiem and Finale, which are emotional reactions to the assassinations of Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy, events that occurred during his time in New York.

These sobering images again use musical connections. In these, the music has gone catastrophically out of tune. The convoluted brass instruments stand for bodies; the open-mouthed but soundless agony is a Crichton version of Munch's The Cry; the turbulence of the rhythms reflects the desperation of the occasion, reinforced by a casual splash of blood. These two paintings, as disturbing as any by Max Ernst, show Crichton in deadly earnest rather than in his earlier carnival mode, and perhaps reflect an artistic crisis as well as an American one.

The final American work, Skywatchers, is based on a more macabre passing-out parade that does extra duty as celebration, protest march, demonstration and procession. Heads, blood-red now, are otherwise blank instead of smiling; nothing much behind the fluff and mechanical jangle of cheap décor and flouncing bodies, with mouths like the business end of Souzaphones. It's tempting to call it a symbolic funeral, frenetic rather than solemn.

New York's frantic pace would seem to be a far cry from the timeless rituals of original Australians, their cave drawings and their survival emblems, but Crichton's overall view of a human family with common origins and responses can accommodate both cultures; he sees and calls on a treasure-house of universal signs from many of these sources.

A similar search for such icons, perhaps Jungian in essence, also affected, sometimes even determined, the direction of much early Abstract Expressionist painting in America.

Water has been a rich and continuing resource over many years for Richard Crichton, so it's natural that he should work from a bayside studio, not far from where as a boy he manhandled his grandfather's rowing boat.

The summer beach paintings are mostly lyrical in spirit, such as "Self Portrait with Florence (Summer Return)", the double portrait of Richard and his wife: painted as if with pink-and-white sun cream, only relieved by that bay-blue with a background of sails, pale waves and hot sky.

It suggests one of those days when a swirling hot north wind whips up the sand. The couple is protected formally by swathes and undulations that might have begun with their patterned towels or dressing gowns, but each is isolated and identified in a different way; umbrella for her, darker pattern for him that links with the dense shadow on the sand. And as so often in Crichton's work, the shadow is as loaded with both formal and symbolic meaning as the substance itself.

More sobering are the sea paintings that deal with the migration of unsettled souls in search of identity: pictures of tall migrant ships with ominous dark sails arriving on an unknown shore by moonlight or being lost on the inhospitable Victorian coastline near Loch Ard Gorge.

These looming apparitions would have seemed both magical and threatening to the first Australians. Crichton paints hypnotic eyes between the sails, and the larger lights suggest that something sinister is behind them. Those lights have their counterparts in his earlier paintings of campsites, where sleepers are disturbed and shaken by the aggressive stab of a flashlight. This is again about the reciprocal watching common to many other pictures here. Both visitors and visited share an apprehensive, fraught exchange.

These ship paintings, more elegantly formal than most, are all the more unsettling for their conjunction of beauty and latent threat.

In that double portrait of Crichton and his wife on the beach, even though the umbrella is what you'd expect to see on a beach, it becomes yet another way for Crichton to place his figures under some form of protection. In some works a shield does a similar job, for example in the more angular and harsh khaki paintings made when he did his National Service. These may represent warrior, victim, or both. In others, a helmet, mask or costume suggests that the human presence underneath may be secretive and unknowable.

Here is a dilemma, and one common to many creative artists. Isolation, even the hint of a more or less benign artistic imprisonment, is necessary to nourish the imagination. But since the ultimate aim for artists is to connect with the similar and different experience of other people, the personal must somehow be made public. Hence the importance of conscious or unconscious symbol, which can leave some experience discreetly concealed in reserve and open to interpretation.

Two other beach paintings come to mind. Tents with Figure, a frontal nude against an agitated pattern of shafts and triangulated shapes; and, Shaded Figure, a more elaborate frilly umbrella, a sky black with heat, against a polite procession of sailing boats. The sharp, repetitive triangles of sail hint at a Freudian connection with the repeated ovoid curves of the umbrella. And as in some Bonnard paintings, you don't immediately notice the part-figure just out of immediate vision. The peculiar tensions between the watcher and the watched are repeated.

It's not the only time in Australian painting that the suggestion of heat in a sky is made with dark instead of light. Arthur Boyd did something similar in his landscapes, also making the shadows very dark to convey heat, unlike the more conventional Impressionist use of violet for shadows in full sunlight.

Beach paintings from the early 'sixties, expressed as totems, seem not so optimistic. Night time is inherently more mysterious. These ghostly presences have the air of suddenly materializing on the beach like water-spirits arriving at a strange place. They are quite different from Tucker's anonymous sex-objects apparently abandoned after some violent episode.

The wide range of work in this exhibition, by no means a complete representation, reflects a unique vision. Even in his very early painting,'Harlequin and Clown' 1955, something that might have been for other young painters simply a pastiche of Chagall or Picasso, there's room for Crichton's very own umbrella, with his personal mark on the drawing.

Richard Crichton is, without apology, a modernist. Everything here is personally observed, felt, and re-invented both formally and emotionally, from the inside-out.

The best artists have been doing just that for a very long time.

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