

# Totemic Entities

It was wonderful to learn that Eastgate and Holst were about to show works by Richard Crichton. For followers and collectors of this exceptionally gifted artist, exhibitions have been too few and far between in recent years.

Born in 1935, and having by 1954 completed painting studies at RMIT – where he would teach painting for some decades – Crichton was at the forefront of his profession by the mid-1960s. After several prestigious local awards he was granted a Harkness Fellowship which allowed him to travel and work in the USA from 1967 to 1969.

Thus, with first-hand experience of the evolving abstract expressionism in both Australia and the USA, Crichton tapped into the spirit of his times, seeking – like Rothko, Newman, Pollock and Still and, in Australia, Nolan, Tucker and Boyd – to plumb the primal beginnings of human existence by reducing the human form to abstract shapes which suggest the atavistic, totemic presence of mankind in the landscape.

While the first generation of New York abstract expressionists referred to earlier North American cultures, in Australia it was the outback that inspired Nolan and Boyd and also proved so very important for the development of Crichton's approach. His half black, half white figures form mysteriously ambiguous counterparts to the Antipodean heads and figures of Nolan and Tucker.

The paintings in this exhibition show humans as if they are spirit entities set against flat, non-descriptive, time-worn, desert and coastal landscapes. Their anonymity and animistic energy suggest that they are symbolic of the eternal struggle to survive. They stand aloof and expressionless, almost ephemeral – but none-the-less persistent – against their uninviting, elemental environments.

Their striped markings and mask-like heads confirm Crichton's conscious effort to relate his work to the realities of our place in the world and to better understand Aboriginal tradition. It is as if he, as a

white artist, is seeking to go back to the concept of the 'Dreaming' and the time of 'Creation'. His primordial shapes hover and haunt, like spirit beings.

In later works, executed after considerable travel throughout Australia, issues surrounding black-white relations would become more specific – as, for instance, in his terrifying paintings of the deserted leprosarium on Little Palm Island where many Aborigines died.

Richard Crichton's paintings capture the spirit of Australia in the way our best poets, writers and musicians have done, reinforcing and embellishing its mythic forces. Which brings us to the curious case of Crichton's cows – black and white, they exist, in bland, undifferentiated landscape settings.

After Nolan's dramatic scenes of cattle caught in trees after floods, Crichton's exquisitely drawn Freisians seem quietly pastoral – chosen, I suspect, for their distinctive patterning and its possibilities for abstraction and expression. The late Peter Mathers, in his ground-breaking novel, *The Wort Papers*, wrote of Freisians: 'They are black and white and when seen at a distance resemble magpies with their heads low, and magpies amidst a herd of Freisians resemble midget calves.'

Crichton's cows, with their endlessly variable and interchangeable markings, were created in the early 1970s. Seen within his entire oeuvre, they could be interpreted as yet another way of symbolising – through the dualities inherent in their patterning and the coupling of their forms and shadows – the themes that have driven Crichton's fertile imagination since he began to paint. If this suggestion, applied to such a subject, seems too far-fetched, simply put it aside! These striking images have their own powerful pictorial presence and can be enjoyed without interpretive analysis.

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