

Makeshift and the Australian patina

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Abstract

Our Christmas tree was an open umbrella stripped of its covering, with the structural wires wrapped in cotton wool, bound with tinsel and adorned with hand crafted decorations. It was a makeshift solution in a time of need. Similarly, there was 'depression furniture' made during the 1930s from packing crates, sugar sacks and other cast-offs, made with considerable skill and inventiveness but, importantly, without professional expertise. These makeshift improvisations are considered 'collectors' items today.

The 'Annandale Imitation Realists' drew critical attention in the 1960's to their art work compiled of found objects and collage. The group's haphazard 'boundary busting' assemblages consisted of scrounged materials constructed in a 'makeshift' manner allied with coterminous reference to regional Indigenous art. At the time Robert Hughes suggested that this exuberant work owed more to 'folk-art incrustation'¹ than high art.

Now we are faced with global warming, climate change and finite resources and there is discussion once more of recycling, energy efficiency and living 'lightly' on the planet. These were concepts that people from our grandparents' generation understood fully and this research investigates this spirit of 'making do' or 'makeshift' that lives on today in contemporary Australian art including painting. By collectively cataloguing Australian artists who work in a makeshift manner, or use materials symbolically aligned with our makeshift heritage a particular local uniqueness is revealed. It is a characteristic that traverses culture, it is the Australian patina.

A 'makeshift' past

Makeshift or 'making do' occurs throughout the world and would appear to be a universal humanistic response to need. Geoffrey Blainey wrote about ordinary life in Australia to the 1900s in *Black Kettle and Full Moon* (2003). Blainey said he had to recollect these stories of the everyday. This indicates that history is an interpretation of

1. Hughes, Robert. [Introduction to *Colin Lanceley / with an introduction by Robert Hughes; and interview by William Wright*, by Colin Lanceley, (Seaforth, N.S.W.: Craftsman House, 1987)], 9.]

facts which can change as we change. Following is an account of the ordinary, yet unwritten, adjunct history of makeshift in Australian art.

Like Margaret Olley my grandmother was a great improviser.¹ Our Christmas tree was an open umbrella stripped of its covering with the structural wires wrapped in cotton wool, bound with tinsel and adorned with hand crafted decorations. It was a makeshift solution in a time of need but was it also art?

Makeshift is tied to the tough times of Australian history, flourishing in adversity as its very nature dictates. These tough times are also the bench marks of our collective history and include the earliest settlements bereft of resources; the tent cities of the gold diggings; the nomadic life of the pastoralists and shearers; the trenches and battlefields of the First World War; the financial destitution of the Great Depression and the Second World War. In all these situations makeshift was, by necessity, integral to every day survival.



Figure 1: *Found 'makeshift' pot*, Altona, Melbourne; Photograph: Terri Brooks, 2007.

Competitions run in popular magazines indicate that, by the 1920s, makeshift had developed into a national pastime. Subsequently termed folk or bush art, it was often made from cheap, worthless or found materials. A common example was 'depression furniture' made during the 1930s from packing crates, sugar sacks and other cast-offs. Surviving examples of 'make do' artifacts made with considerable skill and inventiveness but, importantly, without professional expertise, are now collectables.



Figure 2: '*Makeshift Apron*', circa 1930, rice sack and material scraps; Photograph: Terri Brooks, 2007.

By definition, Australian makeshift includes an object or thing created either by (a) inventiveness or intuition utilizing whatever materials were at hand, or (b) constructed in an expedient or no-nonsense manner that was 'good enough' for the job. Over time, makeshift in Australia also developed an element of humour by taking 'any old how' to extremes, reinforcing the cultural importance of this adaptive way of living. That makeshift has deep cultural meaning to some Australians is well illustrated by the following abbreviated death notice placed by my friend upon the death of John Daley aged 92, in 2005:

DALEY. John, Jack (Jim) Pioneer in outback Australia, POW on the Thai Burma railway – one of Weary's Men, ...You showed us how to survive, and thrive, by improvising with whatever materials were at hand. If those materials weren't too flash, wit would usually do the trick.²

As Federation approached, the outback 'bush' persona championed by popular writers including Henry Lawson, was promoted as the aspirational Australian regardless of where you lived. Making-do was part of this dinky-die persona, and the role of the 'innovative maker' was to resurface again and again in the survival and day to day life skills of the shearer, the ANZAC digger and the itinerant worker or swaggie. This legacy of makeshift has continued to inform cultural values in Australian contemporary society, being evident in: the egalitarian or classless nature of our society; our general willingness to have a go and give a 'fair go' for all; the notion of 'she'll be right' mate; and a short tolerance for 'pretentiousness' or the 'tall poppy syndrome.' Other remnants of our makeshift past include, for example, the unofficial Marine motto; 'improvise, adapt and overcome,'³ and terminologies such as 'rough as bags' and 'jack of all trades.'

Landscape

Having the knack for 'makeshift' is as integral as 'survival' in the outback. Australia is a unique, rugged, harsh and yet somehow beautiful country. Australian Indigenous art and culture, like all Indigenous cultures, reflects the regional landscape of its origin. At the heart of Aboriginal culture is a deep relationship with nature which is reflected in their art leading artist Jonathan Kimberly to conclude that 'paint, painting, painter – all are the land.'⁴ Generations of non-Indigenous Australians also have a great love of land as reflected in bush ballads, poems and song including the notion of 'the wide brown land' and the rustic windmills and woolsheds of the 'sunburnt country'. Two cultures, one still to be reconciled land.

The Australian Patina

Marcel Duchamp's ready-mades, the idea of the found object as art, the concept of 'lost and found'⁵ along with the art craft debate⁶ of the 1990s have blurred the boundaries of what art can be. In the 1990s a reevaluation of 'waste not want not' cultural objects raised their status to 'everyday art' in two key exhibitions; *Bush Toys and Furniture* at the Powerhouse museum 1990, and *Everyday Art, Australian Folk Art*, curated by Jim Logan at National Gallery of Australia, in 1998. Given the cultural significance of the history of makeshift to Australia this reevaluation begs the question of fine art, since it appears that no such assessment has been convened on the makeshift qualities of 'high' Australian art.

The Heidelberg School (including Tom Roberts, Arthur Streeton and Frederick McCubbin) 'camped rough' in an empty house in Summit Drive, Eaglemont, to paint the golden summers. According to Dutton, 'they lived in an eight-roomed wooden dwelling where they made beds from saplings and floursacks and painted cedar cigar box lids'.⁷ These paintings resulted in the most famous exhibition in Australia's history, the 9x5 exhibition of Impressionist paintings held in Melbourne in 1889, so called because the cigar box lids they painted on measured that size in Imperial inches. It was a makeshift act.

Australian art history is littered with makeshift, but interestingly when reference is made to Australian makeshift in art, there is often co-terminous reference to Australian Indigenous art. To exemplify this observation during the 20th century successive waves of white Aboriginalism swept Australian culture, from the adaptation of the Indigenous call of the Co-wee in the late 1890s to Paul Hogan's film *Crocodile Dundee* in the 1980s. The idea of a legacy or 'indebtedness' to Aboriginal culture in the establishment or creation of the 'Australian' character which

encapsulates makeshift was raised by Russel Ward in the *Australian Legend* (1958). Since then, recent publications suggest a dual history of Australia. Maria Nugent (2005) described Botany Bay ‘as a place where histories meet. This is a meeting in the sense of connecting and converging as well as colliding and clashing.’⁸ In my opinion this history, in turn, reflects the subsequent history of Australia. Additionally Philip Jones explored surviving hybrid objects from early encounters that bear the Australian double cultural patina⁹ in *Ochre and Rust* (2007). They bring new validity to Les Murray’s words from the 1970s: ‘In Australian civilisation, I would contend, convergence between black and white is a fact, a subtle process, hard to discern often, and hard to produce evidence for.’¹⁰ The harsh rugged Australian landscape is the ‘theatre’ or common ground for this interaction of histories.

In the early 1960s a group of Sydney artists including Colin Lanceley, Michael Brown and Ross Crothall, calling themselves the ‘Annandale Imitation Realists’, drew critical attention for their work compiled from found objects and collage. Championed by Elwyn Lynn and John Olsen, the group’s haphazard ‘boundary busting’ assemblages consisted of scrounged materials such as house paint (including the lids), cheap toys, scrap material and furniture. Whilst reference is made to the influence of Marcel Duchamp and Kurt Schwitters, Robert Hughes suggests however that the exuberant work owes more to ‘folk-art incrustation’¹¹ than high art as the Imitation Realists had not seen the American Pop Art or collage of Robert Rauschenberg, ‘to which theirs compared.’¹² Hughes also refers to the influence of Sepik art: ‘In the early 1960s the Sydney artworld was saturated in Melanesian art, particularly from the Sepik. One could not be unfamiliar with it.’¹³ Colin Lanceley said: ‘What we admired so much in primitive art was that it declared itself. It was unambiguous and rough and direct.’¹⁴ According to Christopher Heathcote writers and critics at the time had difficulty classifying the work of the ‘Imitation Realists’:

Weaving through most reviews was a confusion over what to call the ‘Imitation Realism’. Several writers opted for pop art, yet the works resembled neither the European nor American varieties of pop. What was this style? Imitation Realism represented a complete disregard for accepted artistic values. It was rough and loud and gaudy... Their chaotic works combined elements of expressionism, folk art, children’s drawings and primitive art, and depicted a private demonology¹⁵

The Annandale Imitation Realists heralded a movement or style which has never been fully absorbed by the mainstream art world.

Consequently, Rosalie Gascoigne, Fiona Hall, John Davis, Robert Klippel, Lorraine Connelly-Northey and Anton Hart are all artists who incorporate makeshift in their art practice. Other established artists working with found objects tied to makeshift

include; the wild wood furniture of Gay Hawkes; the stacked aged cooking utensils of Donna Marcos; Victor Meertens' hammered monoliths of painted galvanised steel; Mandy Gunn's woven shredded recycled telephone directories;¹⁶ Madonna Staunton's concrete poetry of assembled everyday detritus; the environmental assemblages of Isobel Davies and the 'mop' thread embroidery of Greer Honeywell.

As Duchamp revolutionized sculpture, Jackson Pollock and abstraction revolutionized painting. Paintings could now have multiple delivery platforms for meaning, via subject, process and materials (including collage and objects). In Australia abstract artists frequently referenced the Australian landscape and looked to Aboriginal art as had the previous generations of modernist artists including Margaret Preston and Russell Drysdale. But the 'brut' in lyrical abstraction whether consciously or not, came from larrikinism and or the use of materials aligned with makeshift. John Olsen, the quintessential larrikin artist 'deliberately imbued his work with an irreverent, almost unfinished, quality'¹⁷ in his series of paintings, *You Beaut Country* 1961-3.¹⁸ Elwyn Lynn, in his work utilized culturally aligned makeshift, depression or bush materials, while Ian Fairweather 'was a great improviser, using whatever materials were at hand.'¹⁹ Tony Tuckson's work has been reviewed within an international context; he is promoted as the major Australian exponent of Abstract Expressionism or Lyrical Abstraction, an international style with American origins. Alternatively he is regarded as prophetic²⁰ in his foretelling of the Indigenous art revolution that would soon follow. However, little reference is paid to other regional or Australian qualities in Tuckson's work, such as directness, economy and egalitarianism or unpretentiousness. Due to this oversight, in a similar vein to 'what was this style' of the 'Annandale Imitation Realists', Australian abstraction languishes by international comparisons.²¹

The next wave in Australia was a resurgence or renaissance of Indigenous art as 'cultural' art.²² Julie Gough describes the market acceptance of Indigenous artists from South-Eastern Australia suggesting:

Artists of south-eastern Australia are generally distinguished by their avoidance of a set art style. Ironically this very individuality, rather than causing attention and embrace by the wider art market as would be the case with non-indigenous art, seems to have placed local Indigenous art into the 'too hard' basket.²³

Aboriginal painting currently represents the outback landscape which was once the main-garde of non-Indigenous Australian art. Australia's historic hey-day of landscape painting commenced with the Impressionists; Tom Roberts and Arthur Streeton, and culminated in the 1980s with the paintings of Fred Williams and John Olsen, who

were both significantly influenced by Aboriginal art.²⁴ The new wave of Indigenous painting commenced at Papunya in the early 1970s on makeshift supports including floor tiles and scrap wood. Two great and popular Indigenous artists, Emily Kam Kngwarray and Rover Thomas, have been compared to Western abstraction in promotional context. But their painting, like Tuckson's painting contains some values that happen to also be Australian makeshift values. The commonality of simplicity, directness and egalitarianism to Australian makeshift combined also with a love of the land (which Kngwarray's work authentically evokes) additionally explains the mainstream popularity of their work. This appeal runs deeper than an incidental resemblance to American abstraction.

The Aboriginal Land Rights Movement coincided with waves of immigration post World War II, which was followed by decades of unprecedented economic development and globalization. From the 1960s to 2000, Australia's collective taste changed from a love of traveling the countryside with the *Leyland Brothers* and Rolf Harris with his makeshift wobble board²⁵ to a darker view of the landscape. The 2005 film *Wolf Creek* is an example. Equally, the iconic *Kath and Kim*, was the highest rating television show in 2007 featuring not a scrap of makeshift. Instead it is based on the art of 'nouveau' tack and the disposable; almost 'waste more.'

Nevertheless contemporary painters continue to reference makeshift including Steven Harvey, Ildiko Kovacs, Jennifer Joseph, Debra Dawes, Dani Marti²⁶ and Clinton Nain. Other well known painters who flirt with a makeshift technique include Jenny Watson's flimsy 'trashy' paintings; Robert Macpherson's parodies of everyday amateur signage; Peter Atkins 2007 exhibition *Readymade Abstraction* (based on everyday street signage and painted on used and distressed tarpaulins) and Adam Cullen's larrikin slap dash technique with shock imagery. The cyclic history of Australian makeshift is a mirror of this country's history of adversity. Currently, there is a new resurgence of makeshift within sustainability due to the threat of climate change. Makeshift and the 'waste not' premise continues to inform a new generation of contemporary artists. From the 'shambolic, open and freewheeling'²⁷ Newcastle-based independent annual experimental festival *This is not art (TINA)*²⁸ to Ash Keating's collaborative work of recompiled garbage, *2020?* for the 2008 Next Wave Festival.^{29 30} The continual and diverse referencing of makeshift in Australian art raises a further question. Is there a need for another reassessment of 'everyday' makeshift cultural objects like my grandmother's Christmas tree which I think it was art?

Keywords: boundaries, makeshift, history.

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1. Stewart, Meg. *Margaret Olley: Far from a Still Life*. 2nd ed. (Australia: Random House, 2007). 'I've always been an improviser – I'm my father's daughter', 175.
 2. Daley, Dermot, and Martin Daley. "Death notices," *Herald Sun*, December 7, 2005.
 3. This motto developed as the marines were regularly given 'hand me downs' from the regular army.
 4. Kimberly, Jonathan. 'Lena Nyadbi' in Brenda Croft (ed), *Art Beyond the Pale: Contemporary Indigenous Art*, (Adelaide Biennial. Art Gallery of South Australia, 2000), 64. cited in Ryan, Judith. *Land Marks*. (Victoria, Australia: Council of trustees, National Gallery of Victoria. 2006), 120.
 5. Concept of Lost and Found: where an object can be abandoned, forgotten or discarded and rediscovered with new meaning.
 6. The art/craft debate of the 1990s was principally about whether the work of practitioners in traditional craft mediums such as ceramics, jewelry or woodworking could be art.
 7. Dutton, Geoffrey. *Tom Roberts*. (Queensland, Australia: Mallard Press, 1989), 16.
 8. Nugent, Maria. *Botany Bay: where histories meet*. (Australia: Allen & Unwin, 2005), 201.
 9. Jones, Philip. *Ochre and Rust*. (South Australia: Wakefield Press, 2007), 7.
 10. Murray, Les. "The Human Hair Thread," *Meanjin*, vol 36, no. 4 (1977): 569.
 11. Hughes, Robert. [Introduction to *Colin Lanceley / with an introduction by Robert Hughes; and interview by William Wright*, by Colin Lanceley, (Seaforth, N.S.W.: Craftsman House, 1987)], 9.
 12. [Ibid.]
 13. Ibid, 8.
 14. Ibid, interview with Colin Lanceley on 'Imitation Realism,' 20.
 15. Heathcote, Christopher. *A quiet revolution: The Rise of Australian Art, 1946-1968*. (Melbourne, Australia: The Text Publishing Company, 1995), 176.
 16. Sustainable art, as distinct from makeshift places a further emphasis on recycling and environmental concerns.
 17. Olsen, John. "Journey into you beaut country," *Queensland art gallery*, http://www.qag.qld.gov.au /collection/australian_art_to_1970/john_olsen (accessed April 25, 2008).
 18. Hart, Deborah. *John Olsen*. 2nd ed. (Australia: Craftsman House, 2000), 57-58.
 19. Bail, Murray. *Fairweather*. (Australia: Queensland Art Gallery, 1994), Doug Hall, 6.

20. As an indication of Tuckson's growing status *McCulloch's Encyclopedia of Australian Art* 2007 edition featured Tuckson's work on the cover, while referring to him in the introduction as 'a prophet.'

21. Overseas markets reflect the reverse of Australia, until recently it was abstract artists, Rothko and DeKooning, not figurative artists, who have set world record prices.

22. Gordon Bennett is an obvious exception, as he also employs Western techniques and ideologies. Also; Smith, Bernard., Terry Smith, and Christopher Heathcote. *Australian Painting, 1788-2000*. 4th ed. (Melbourne, Victoria: Oxford University Press, 2001). 'Contemporary Aboriginal painting... differs from painting elsewhere in that its essential basis is less the individual artist's subjective experience and more the social responsibility of maintaining the representation of ... clan and family knowledge.' Terry Smith: 495.

23. Julie Gough, "Being there, Then and Now: Aspects of South-East Aboriginal Art" In Ryan, Judith. *Land Marks*. (Victoria, Australia: Council of trustees, National Gallery of Victoria, 2006), 128.

24. James Mollison (1989) *A Singular Vision: The Art of Fred Williams*, only mentions Aboriginal culture once in relation to Williams' work, and it is in reference to Williams painting on location at an Aboriginal Burial ground near Tibooburra, NSW not in relation to any artistic influence: 123. Whereas Berndt, R., M., and Phillips, E., (1973) *The Australian Aboriginal Heritage*, states the following 'Fred Williams, also a painter of the Australian bush, is a further case in point. By a process of simplification and 'conventionalization' he has arrived at something that is not so far removed from the rhythmic and 'repetitive' art of the Central Australian Aborigines, primarily expressed through the intricate incising on their secret-sacred boards': 296.

25. Rolf Harris' wobble board when waved repeatedly made a rhythmic sound reminiscent of Aboriginal instruments including the didgeridoo while he sang *Tie me kangaroo down sport* a lyric in Pidgin English.

26. I have included Dani Marti here even though he doesn't paint as such, his solutions and references are painterly.

28. Barkley, Glenn. "Time for a change", *Artist Profile*, Issue 3 (2008): 62.

29. 'This is not Art' TINA, <http://www.thisisnotart.org/> (accessed May 28, 2008).

30. 'Art Notes: Victoria,' *Art Monthly Australia*, Issue #209 (2008): 56.

31. Green, Michael. "Waste Not", *The Age*, May 18, 2008: Upfront 9.