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BERNARD OLLIS

CATALOGUE ESSAY

Bernard Ollis, an essay by John McDonald art critic for the Sydney Morning Herald

Bernard Ollis is one of those painters who elude easy categorization. This is at best a mixed blessing, because art historians love to be able to define an artist as an expressionist, a realist, a surrealist, or some plausible combination. Ollis is a little of each, but ultimately none of the above. He is a figurative painter, but like most established artists is willing to admit that all art is abstract. He is a painter of people, but with none of the angst and pessimism that seem to be standard features of those artists who spend their careers studying the Human Condition. There is a lot of humour in Ollis's work, but none of the smug, all-pervasive irony beloved of the Postmodernists. He is, in short, an awkward proposition, and his paintings revel in a kind of studied awkwardness.

Ollis is a narrative painter, but each picture is nothing more than a fragment. He will begin with a simple setting such as a bedroom, a street, or a patio, and gradually add the *dramatis personae* and details. A work develops its own momentum, with objects, people or animals multiplying as if by spontaneous generation. While Ollis may begin with a specific idea, by the time the painting is finished it has usually metamorphosed into something quite different.

This is partly a function of Ollis's sheer pleasure in the act of painting. As Director of the National Art School, it might be expected that he would have little time to spend in the studio, but he grabs every opportunity with a fierce dedication that few artists can match. Painting is a passion for Ollis, and

perhaps a way of escaping the pressures of the workaday world. His pictures, accordingly, are full of fantasy. He creates imaginary scenarios in the manner of a playwright or a film director. Within his own world he can play God. This might mean pumping up the colour, adding a few exotic birds and beasts, or elongating a figure's arms or legs. All of Ollis's paintings have a provisional, slightly vertiginous feeling – spaces are flattened, solid objects seem to waver and tremble, shadows take on a life of their own.

Ollis says he can't remember a time when he wasn't painting, or at least wanting to paint. He was born into a working class family in one of the more prosperous parts of England, near Bath. He worked as a gravedigger, a monumental stone mason, a shop assistant, a baker and a postman, before going to art school. He completed eight years of art education with a three-year stint at the Royal College of Art in London, then set sail for Australia where he has lived ever since. His introduction to the continent, at the age of 25, was a teaching post in Darwin, which provided a crash course in the Australian Way of Life.

Ollis finds that his life experiences keep trickling back into his paintings, by a kind of free association. He will draw a ceiling fan onto a blank canvas, to create a room. His thoughts will drift back to a particular hotel in a foreign country, and he will add a mosquito net and a bedside clock. The view from a window might lead him in another direction. The story keeps changing as new details appear, until finally he decides there is too much going on, and starts to eliminate superfluous elements. He says he likes the idea of using "the full orchestra, rather than a string quartet," but finds that not every composition is suited to the Wagnerian approach.

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Some works, such as a large painting of a ventriloquist and his dummy, have been given a radical reworking to good effect. Coming into the studio late one night, Ollis decided the picture had grown too congested, and blacked out most of the imagery. Afterwards, he added a ring of large birds, which give the work an air of subtle menace – perhaps as a memory of all the savage crows and evil dummies from B-grade horror films, but also because there is something inherently poetic about the idea of displaced speech and frantic flight in a closed, darkened room.

Such moments recur at intervals in Ollis's oeuvre. His tones are usually much brighter, the tempo more upbeat. He is happy to describe a lot of his imagery as whimsical, but insists this doesn't mean that he is anything less than deadly serious about the work. If his pictures often resemble stage sets, this is because he is fascinated by the play of semblance and reality that we all enact on a daily basis. In one recent piece he began with two figures, a man and a woman, and gradually began to see the backdrop as a stage set. As he worked, the picture became a vaudeville scene, with the background becoming a painting of a painted backdrop – a double dose of illusion and artifice.

That taste for theatricality is apparent in most of Ollis's paintings, but while his backdrops may appear flat and decorative, he rarely transforms them into stage props. He also avoids obvious instances of melodrama and cliché. Regardless of context, most of his figures wear blank, impassive expressions. He has an explanation for this: "What's happening to them, is happening internally... And hopefully that allows the viewer to identify with them in a more general way."

A few years ago, Ollis went through a phase in which almost every one of his characters wore a mask. It was a way of blurring the boundaries between humans and the exotic beasts he loves to paint. In fact, there was no certainty as to what lay behind the disguises. "They might be people, they might be animals, they might be dolls," he says. "When you put on a mask you can get away with murder."

It was also a way of symbolizing the social masks we all wear, and perhaps an homage to James Ensor, one of Ollis's favourite painters. Ensor's early pictures are filled with masks and grotesques, skeletons and dream imagery. Ollis has vivid recollections of the first time he saw Ensor's masterpiece, *The Entry of Christ into Brussels in 1889*, when it was shown at the Royal Academy in London.

In Ensor's painting, Christ appears in a procession, underneath a huge banner proclaiming "Vive la Sociale!" – a celebration of the workers and urban poor who were being let down by the government and the Church. Ollis might sympathize with Ensor's message – and his extraordinary colours – but he is more likely to show the workers on a day off, rather than marching side-by-side with the Messiah. In one of his recent pictures a brass band in plain uniform trudges down a lonely road by moonlight. One imagines the musicians to be miners or factory workers, making their way to or from some local function.

Ollis draws most of his subjects from such ordinary scenes. He shows people in the street or a park, in a cinema or restaurant, perhaps in a hotel room or relaxing at home. He might fill a patio with leaping dogs, birds and snakes, but this doesn't disturb a sleek-looking couple sitting in their easy chairs amid

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the furore. In this, and other pictures, Ollis cannot resist adding a touch of the extraordinary to an otherwise unexceptional subject. He hopes, always, that some small profundity might emerge from the clash of the two registers.

In choosing his subjects Ollis tries to avoid anything "too proscriptive", such as a painting with a particular message or moral. On the other hand, he is wary of visual stereotypes: sad and lonely individuals leading lives of quiet desperation, expressions of defiant anger or madness, parables about males and females, youth and old age, wealth and poverty. These elements are all present in Ollis's work, but never in an obvious manner. He likes to set the scene, but hates conclusions.

This is also what distinguishes his work from those forms of narrative art that function largely as illustration. "With illustration," he says, "first you have a story about a man walking down a road, and then you set out to capture that scene. I tend to work the other way around, starting with an image or a visual idea, and building a story around it."

That story is more like a series of film stills – frozen moments snipped from some larger narrative that neither the viewer nor the artist can ever complete. There is, however, a great deal of sustenance for the imagination. Bernard Berenson argued that paintings should be still and silent, "ineloquent"; but Ollis's pictures are loquacious. They are not content to sit quietly on the wall as a form of interior decoration, they have an urge to engage with an audience, even if that communication takes the form of a visual puzzle that invites decoding.

Ollis would argue that most things in life do not happen in a clean and logical manner: many stories are sent off-course by random incidents and

accidents. We are all the playthings of chance. We zig-zag through life like a billiard ball bouncing from one cushion to the next, or like the figures in one of Ollis's street scenes, who walk like automatons into each other's paths, jostling and colliding, as though they feel hemmed-in by the edge of the canvas. People going from one place to another, people on the move – even if they don't have a destination. For Ollis this is one version of the Human Condition. He calls himself a humanist, and hopes that all his works reveal his sympathy for human beings, whether they are at work or at play, in a stampede or a carnival. It is not part of his temperament to be censorious or nihilistic.

"I understand that the world we live in is one in which people want to absorb the maximum amount of information in the shortest possible time," he says. "Painting may be suffering more than most activities, because no-one wants to spend time with things, particularly things that may be challenging or confronting. But painting is a difficult process, and I've always loved the problems it throws up."

In life, as in painting, Ollis has no time for those who try and avoid the hard issues. As director of an art school, he has probably seen more than his share; as a painter he is addicted to the challenges that each picture provides. The mirror he turns on the world is a distorted one, but his paintings tend to err on the positive side. There is an energy in these canvases that has the power to disarm the viewer, a joie-de-vivre that turns every scene into a fantastic charade. In the midst of this frantic pageant, one catches alternating glimpses of the world we know, and the world we would prefer.

John McDonald (2006)

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