

Tales of the Unexpected - aspects of contemporary Australian Art

It is like Godard's idea that what is important is what comes before and after the movie. It is the implication that this is just a slice of a continuing action... I think this is one of the reasons I allow myself to work with moving figures - to create this implication that something has come before and something will happen after. The scene is a particular chunk of the action that you look through - a privileged moment in a continuum.

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It may be true that one has to choose between ethics and aesthetics, but it is no less true that, whichever one chooses, one will always find the other at the end of the road. For the very definition of the human condition should be in the *mise en scène* itself.

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In overview, Boynes's art over the past three decades has shifted in emphasis between the documentary and the fictional: moving from overt sociopolitical work towards more abstract interventions, from the shimmering data of cities seen from above to close-up viewpoints of figures in city-spaces. There are significant continuities throughout: a passionate engagement with the art-making process, with film and with the human condition reflected through the prism of urban experience.

In the initial stages of making his recent urban paintings, Boynes photographed people in cities. He was not interested in the identity of individuals but rather in conveying archetypal urban dwellers. After taking hundreds of photographs, he would then rigorously select, edit and transform a particular image: scanning into the computer, relaying it via a large silk-screen to the canvas and vigorously reworking the whole in the painting process. The photographic images are like sketchbook notations for Boynes. They also remain as vital documentary trace elements in the work. It is, however, in process of manipulating the painterly surface on canvas - dragging the screen in the wet paint, scrubbing and washing the surface back to the point of erasure and rebuilding it with successive layers and glazes - that the work attains its distinctive fugitive aura and luminosity.

Rendez-vous 2000 is one of the paintings that originated during a residency Boynes undertook at artspace in Sydney's bustling Woolloomooloo. It was a fruitful but difficult time. The artist notes that the area was under construction, so there was only a quiet period of a maximum of three hours each day. 'It drove me mad at the time... but that sense of continuous activity gradually filtered into my work. I was observing the pattern of people, moving up and down, to and from the CBD... They had an urgency about them.'

The environments that Boynes's figures inhabit in the works are spaces of transit and exchange: crossings, walkways, escalators, stairways and subway stations. He notes that these are spaces that no one owns, that everyone has a right to use. They can also be lonely, dangerous spaces. 'They conceal an undercurrent of disturbance, yet they are spaces that we all need. I try to make those spaces as central and visually engaging as I can.' Works such as *Rendez-vous 2000*, *Pyrmont 2002* and *After Hours 2002* suggest open-ended possibilities of people coming and going via these ambient city spaces. It is the implication of life beyond a particular 'frame' that is of utmost significance to the artist.

Another significant aspect of Boynes's work is the repetition of elements from one work to another - each with their own nuances, giving the feel of sequential film frames or different takes on the same scene. Among the repeated motifs he has used over the years is the screening device of the *louvre window* or *venetian blind*, as in the extraordinary subtle *Rear window 2001*, with the implication being of something secret or mysterious occurring beyond our vision.

To attain the qualities he is searching for, Boynes often puts two or three fragments together in the same

work. For *The ghosts of Grand Central* and the ensuing larger painting *Grand Central Station 2001*, he initially stood on balconies at each end of the station in New York, photographing the many people walking through.

Dream-like, filmic possibilities inform Robert Boynes's recent paintings of urban environments. They suggest 'fictional documentaries', drawing on observations of contemporary urban life and transmuting them into atmospheric fictions.

These people would probably be deeply surprised that they have ended up rebuilt into something that is an amalgam of all the emotions going through that space. When I'm photographing people I almost want to hold my hand up and say, 'I'm sorry, I am not photographing you'. Then the shutter goes 'click' and it seems like a lie. It seems as if I'm stealing their image but that is only a point of departure. What I'm doing in reworking the images later on, is finding another spirit that stands for something more than the specific individual.

Through shifting, grainy, blurring passages of luminosity and shadow, of figures moving across city environments set against ambient neon signs, rushing to a rendezvous of drifting ghost-like through the wet streets at night, Boynes's fragmentary 'fictional documentaries' illuminate imagination. They reveal people enmeshed in the momentum of life, passing on their journeys in the here and now and across generational divides. What Boynes ultimately suggests in his evocative urban spaces is that, in the many arbitrary aspects of daily life, there are possibilities for glimpsing something of the inherent energy, continuity and illusive mystery underlying human experience and memory. As he remarked about the making of *Times Square*:

It was raining like mad and I kept trying to shoot in that low light. The figure on a was moving through... a shrouded figure - I just liked the motion of the wheels on the zebra crossing and the light. The scene became transformed into the painting process. It is a memory that just ghosts its way across the crossing and then it's gone.

- i. All quotes from Robert Boynes were recorded in an interview with the author, 5 February 2002.
- ii. Quoted by Susan Sontag in 'Godard', *A Susan Sontag Reader*, introduction by Elizabeth Hardwick, Penguin Books, Middlesex, UK, 1982, p.235.

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