

Robert Boynes. *The Woolloomooloo Bay Series*

The art of Robert Boynes has often used the city as its source. The urban environment has spawned a variety of images and themes from the beginnings of the artist's exhibiting career in the mid-1960s to his most recent work as evinced in the present series.

The ineluctable attraction of the city for Boynes partly lies in its innate ambiguities. The city is both a generic and a specific metaphor. Generic, in that his paintings are making statements that have universal relevance. Particular, in that it is a specific city (in the present series, Sydney) that has provoked his reaction. That these two operate with perceptual and conceptual simultaneity infuses the resultant images with a palpable aesthetic and thematic tension.

The positive and negative spaces of the urban structures that comprise the city speak of relationships in both formal and metaphoric ways. The identity and character of a city is predicated on how individuals "operate" within the structures and within the spaces between structures, **not** on the structures themselves. The latter provide matrices in which action takes place. They are the set in which the protagonists conduct those activities that comprise the ritual of urban existence.

Much urban activity is public, or at least is performed in public spaces. The meanings of this activity for those participating and for those observing are not disclosed. Meaning remains entrapped within individuals. Disclosure in any overt way does not happen. Interpretation or translation of viewed action onto the static stage of the painter's canvas becomes a way of opening a complex narrative where viewer and viewed are the personae in the artist's painted drama.

The complexities of the narrative are underscored by the artist's methods. Boynes constructs his paintings so that the end product is invested with the implied potentialities of the filmic "still". Meaning for the "still" does not lie within itself. Any meaning is predicated on what has gone before and what will come after. This is not at all the case with Boynes's works. They are vehemently autonomous yet never deny the possibilities that they could constitute parts of a wider narrative than that contained within the parameters of the canvas. The ostensible duality leaves each work with a feeling of imminence, an allusion to what may lie beneath the surface, to what may or may not be disclosed.

Boynes achieves aesthetic resolution through a finely nuanced orchestration of a small but highly effective selection of expressive devices and motifs. Most of the works in the present series are comprised of more than one canvas or of more than one image on each canvas. The elision/collision of images creates disjunctive combinations in a thematic sense.

So, for example in *The stairs. Time Lapse* the left-hand image shows partial figures moving through the picture plane, one towards the viewer, the other away. The right-hand image has a man (also with his back to the viewer) climbing a set of stairs. We, as viewers, are offered the possibility of constructing a narrative, to fill in the omissions (?) purposefully created by the artist. Formally the spare verticals of the figures are contrasted against the neatly aligned horizontals of the stairs, all imbued with an incipient abstraction, subtly present despite the actual **realness** of the figures and the built elements.

The static presentation of an (implied) interrupted narrative and the subsequent kinetic consequences of a continuous narrative existing simultaneously within this work (and others in this series) are beautifully conveyed by the artist. I stated above that it is in the spaces **between** urban structures, the spaces where individuals interact, that identity is determined. I believe that it is in the interstices between images where Boynes invests his paintings with meaning. For Boynes the elision of images can be abruptly interrupted visually. The elisions can be clearly demarcated (as in *Chess Moves*) or expressed through inchoate masses of colour (as in *Vibrating shadows*). Whatever their formal means, the expressive force of the "spaces between" is as potent as the other pictorial elements which populate Boynes' art.

Boynes' images have an insistent impact. They are strikingly individual both in the artist's pictorial vocabulary and in the acuity of his perceptions about the urban milieu. Boynes continues to make important statements about contemporary culture in a language whose powerful beauty is equalled by the incisiveness of his urban critique.

Peter Haynes
Director, Canberra Museum and Gallery
July 2000