

Isolation and Creativity:

Ian Fairweather's 1952 Raft Journey

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Abstract

Scottish-born Ian Fairweather (1891-1974) is acclaimed as one of Australia's greatest modernist artists. A recluse and wanderer, he substantially refused to engage with society and the art world. At the age of sixty he made a potentially suicidal sixteen day crossing of the Timor Sea on a ramshackle raft. On the basis of this journey, and his choice in old age to eschew comfort and live like a hermit, public perceptions have tended to polarise—he is considered either genius or madman. The legend of Fairweather's life can eclipse the importance of his art.

The questions addressed in this thesis are: what motivated the artist to go to such lengths of disassociation, and how important was this to his creativity? To determine the factors underpinning Fairweather's philosophy and impulse to self-isolate, his early life and itinerant years in Australia and Asia, his raft journey, and his preference for islands are examined. The problem is the artist left few clues. The body of his known work amounts to some 550 paintings and drawings, one small sculpture, one published book and a few artefacts including letters and an unpublished manuscript. These have already been extensively researched.

In aiming to present a new perspective on Fairweather and offer deeper insights into his life choices, this thesis draws the conclusion that despite his itinerant lifestyle Ian Fairweather was a strongly self-directed individual who opted for a life of minimalism based on non-materialist principles. His deeply spiritual work and his facility with Chinese language, culture and calligraphy reveal a man of great complexity who developed an 'island mentality' in order to fully realise his art.

Research is based on available literature, news media, the internet and Fairweather's art. Interviews were conducted with key Fairweather researchers Murray Bail and Tony Twigg. Field research was undertaken in Brisbane, Bribie Island and Darwin. The archives of H. S. Ede were accessed at Kettle's Yard, Cambridge University, UK. The works of creativity theorists were examined to determine the relevance of psychosis to

creativity, Fairweather's working methods were considered against Galenson's theory of art, and comparisons were drawn with fellow isolationists, artist Paul Gauguin and the fictional Robinson Crusoe.

The creative work developed in parallel with this thesis is the manuscript *Each step into the light*: poems exploring Ian Fairweather's life, his raft journey, and his compelling works of art.

