Thea Proctor: Towards a stylish Australia

2013 | Sydney Moderns: Art for a New World, Art Gallery of New South Wales

This essay was included in the 324 pp. catalogue for a major Art Gallery of New South Wales exhibition, Sydney Moderns: Art for a New World, 2013. It assessed the contribution of the artist-designer Thea Proctor as a significant contributor to design, teaching and the wider visual culture of modernism in Australia from the 1890s to the 1950s. It has been well established in scholarship for twenty-five years that modernism in 1920s Australia was mediated through women's spaces and women's bodies, in decorative arts, fashion, advertising and department-store culture.

In previous research, McNeil pursued the claims of the early feminist histories of Australian visual culture such as Mary Eagle. His precise focus on the development of interior decoration and also product design as an avenue for creative women practitioners was published as Designing Women in Art History (1994).

McNeil's essay here is based on primary research conducted in the archives of the National Gallery of Australia. It argues for Proctor's precise understanding of what suited Australian conditions and contemporary society. As well as writing for the catalogue, McNeil spent considerable time briefing the artist-designer Gitte Weise on the correct colour schemes for her recreation of the 'Burdekin House' room, the first exhibition of modern furniture in Australia (1929). This was because of his extensive archival research into the period.
Thea Proctor: towards a stylish Australia

PETER McNEIL

Thea Proctor was born in October 1982. The same month as the opening of the Sydney International Exhibition, the first ambitious planned, large-scale exposition held in the Australian colonies, and a turning point for the gradually diminishing commercial influence of Great Britain. It is remarkable that the scene was so tender. Being already middle-aged by the time, she had skillful use of aspects of past helped her to compose a new concept of taste for Sydney. Proctor's legacy is complex because much of it was unacknowledged and also unexamined. It is as much the impact of her stylish appearance, and her extensive collaborations and interviews on modern design, as it is in her art works, many of which pervasive on the stage and lights avant-garde aspect of art. For the information Proctor, design informed not only to the applied and industrial arts but to a hold, modern approach to all of these. She advocates for women artists, she drew upon popular for lessons for others, what is well known of Sydney designers — a particular women, including the textile designer Vicki Sorensen and the interior designer Alinka Paliwacz.

In addition to her art practice Proctor designed magazine covers, illustrations and advertising （such as for the Australian luggage manufacturer, The Australian 【The Style Decorator】 and gave advice to modern designers in flower arranging and food presentation. From 1982 to 1983 she lived in London, apart from a return to Australia in late 1982. On her return to Sydney she shows a time when she was emerging as an artist for fashion — she was interviewed on several radio and television networks about trends and fashion. An advocate for better use of flowers, he noted this trend of women’s interest in flowers was not limited to London. It was also known for the decorative arrangements she made to accompany exhibitions of her art, the Sydney Morning Herald reported that "for the opening ceremony this afternoon, Miss Proctor is preparing a number of her well known arrangements of flowers and water." In all, other activities Proctor contributed to Australia's modern national design ethos.

Proctor was also involved in arts and design. In 1982, for example, she was one of only two artists to exhibit painty pictures at the AIS galleries for Thea Proctor: Towards a stylish Australia.

Catalogue entry, pp. 98-99
Australians must Develop Taste says Miss Thea Proctor

PETER McNEIL
Thea Proctor: Towards a stylish Australia

Catalogue entry, pp. 100-101
Thea Proctor: Towards a stylish Australia

Catalogue entry, pp. 102-103
PETER McNEIL
Thea Proctor: Towards a stylish Australia

Catalogue front and back cover
Contents

19 Colour, light and colour-music
21 Colour, light and rhythm: touches for modernity
DEBORAH EDWARDS
FOCUS ESSAYS
34 Writing colour: from Matisse to van Gogh to
Grave Costington-Smith
BRIJIT JAIN
38 The last word: Terence Manning, Neil A Gyn
and Nicole Simpson
JAMIE CHAMPION and TYRAGALY EDWARDS
42 Redec Webber: the early years
DEBORAH CLARK
46 Ray de Meurieu: colour music and the Armaghghans
EUGENIA GERMANI
50 The 1910 Colour and art exhibition: myth busting
WILLIAM COYNE
56 De Meurieu decided
NIEL HUTCHISON

65 Modern life, modern city
67 Making Sydney modern: the artistic shaping
of the postwar city
CHARLES MUMMISE
FOCUS ESSAYS
66 Modern women: full throttle
CATHERINE MCKIN
92 Harold Cazneaux’s new photo portraits
NINA BUKULICE
104 Tina Proctor: towards a stylish Australia
PETER MANDL
106 Sydney: the Smith and the artists of The Home
ROBERT MCCULLY
110 Adrian Feint: a silky modernist?
EMMA BOND
114 Innovation in the decorative arts
JOHN MANUEL
118 Colour and modern public in the interwar decades
PAMELA DRESCH

120 Modernist: The Burbank House exhibition
HARLEY MERRY
126 En glade: Vera Roberts and The Burbank House exhibition
GAIL WASS
127 Modern destinations
HARLEY MERRY
140 Art deco, modern life and the internationalisation
of Sydney
CAROLINE WHEELER-TOMSON
144 Walter Burley Griffin and Marion Mahony Griffin: International modernists
SARAH BRUNOC
148 Ultra mod: modernism, modern art and the Sydney School
CAROLINE WHEELER-TOMSON
154 Icon of modernity: the Sydney Harbour Bridge
DAVID LIPPINCOTT
156 Fred Weisblat: tableaux of the modern city
DEBORAH EDWARDS
159 Ray de Meurieu’s images of the city and Sydney mural painting
JESS HAYDING
174 Sex, drugs and modern art: the Sydney galleries
STEVIE MULLER
184 Modernist photography: the machine age in Sydney with
THEO ANDERSON
186 Frank Hinder’s ‘Futuristic’
HELMUT SCHWARZ

187 Still life as laboratory table
156 Still life as laboratory table
DAVID LIPPINCOTT

215 Landscapes of modernity
217 Landscapes of modernity: 1950s–60s
SARAH EDWARDS

237 Paths to Australian abstraction
239 The pedagogy of modern art: the quest for
modernity by Australian artists abroad
THOMAS PILKON
FOCUS ESSAYS
252 ‘Hermione’ Ormoll: Black, Grace Crowley
and Anne Dangar
THOMAS PILKON
264 Anne Dangar at Holy-Sulata
HELEN MULLIN
262 The Sydney school: Ormoll, Black, Modern Art
Ecstasy and the Crawford-Faule School
SARAH EDWARDS
266 Spectral colour forms: the sculpture
of Thomas Lame
GREGORY BATTEN
270 Towards the abstract: the art of Exhibition 7
HELEN MULLIN
272 Collaborations: Grace Crowley and Ralph Balson
HELEN MULLIN
274 Margi Levens and the establishment of
Matilda Gallery
PAUL KELLY
274 Carl Plate and the Holanda Gallery
GESS HAYDING
276 Ray de Meurieu’s cubism and the 1930s
SARAH EDWARDS
286 Frank Hinder’s paths to abstraction
JESS HAYDING
290 ‘What the art of the abstract’: Ralph Balson’s
1941 exhibition
JESS HAYDING
297 Index
305 Select bibliography
312 List of works
316 Acknowledgements
319 Credits
320 Index
The Art Gallery of New South Wales is pleased to present Sydney Modernist: Towards a stylish Australia. This exhibition and publication focusing on the progressive art movements that shaped Sydney's art for a new world, marks the 20th anniversary of the Gallery. The publication provides an expanded view of the events and social context of the formative years in the evolution of Australian art. From the late 1940s, the Art Gallery of New South Wales has been one of the leading contemporary collectors of Sydney modernist artworks. Sydney modernist has provided an exciting opportunity to review these holdings alongside exceptional works from numerous public and private collections across Australia. I extend my sincere thanks...