A new book on the seminal Australian art historian Bernard Smith recognises that he remains one of the most interesting figures in Australian art history. *Antipodean Perspective*, edited by Rex Butler and Sheridan Palmer, is a guided tour of Bernard Smith’s persistent, fine-grained, analytical and expert accounts of art and its cultures. Born in 1916, Smith ascended from a bleak beginning to the pinnacle of art history scholarship in Australia. In 1955 he became a lecturer at the University of Melbourne and in 1967 he became director of the Power Institute of Fine Arts in Sydney. This text traverses Smith’s major contributions to the field during his long academic life. In it, 28 leading scholars and artists supplement carefully chosen excerpts from Smith’s books, papers, speeches, autobiography and manifesto with passages that explain how his writing influenced the course of their own thoughts and speculate on what his passages on art represent today.

The authors point out how Smith’s encyclopaedic and taxonomical tendencies are underwritten by a steadfast sense of a duty of care to Australia and its art. Smith was able to extend his academic gaze not only to regard the past and the future, but also into the horrors of colonial dispossession and urgency of antipodean vision, and he researched how both of these tendencies permeate Australian identity both internally and when viewed from afar. The hallmark of Smith’s work was perhaps its production of this unified panorama of disunity.

As the chapters couple Smith’s primary texts with accompanying interpretive glosses, the book undulates in tone but this makes it an interesting read. The reader learns how Smith was uncannily prophetic of shifts in art and society (pp. 176, 199). He grasped cultural phenomena as being never explained entirely by either a pattern of evolution or demise. Rather, he had an unbending appreciation of culture’s constant dynamic relationships, both spatially and temporally. It was only in the broad sense, concerning the entirety of modernism, that he ventured to definitively identify it as ending. To Smith, modernist art’s apotheosis of ‘form’ (seen in *Art Informel* and Abstract Expressionism of the 1950s) was a mark of modernism’s decline. It seems that the aspiration for a pure or high modernism that was provocatively abstract, autonomous and indirectly related to content was so premised on pushing boundaries that it resulted in atrophy (p. 152). The subsequent
generation of contemporary artists of the 1960s, intent on finding ways to
dematerialise art’s forms, was, in many cases, feeling the same way, and many of that
generation sought to recalibrate their work to a socio-political axis that ‘cuts across
stylistic divisions’ in order to be ‘involved in social change’ (p. 160). From corralling
figurative painters in Melbourne in the 1950s (into a group mounting a counter-
attack on derivative, effect-based neo-avantgarde art) through to his publishing of
to the discipline 50 years later) he lived to catalyse big thinking and adventurous
engagement rather than posturing and gestures that relied on superficial appeal
to novelty. He preferred that things, people, places and events be addressed in an
accessible and transparent way. Stains, blots or drips for their own sake were too
introspective, ascetic, anodyne and inhibited, too remote from things, people, places
and events. In the collection, Ian McLean writes briefly of Smith’s concept of the
Formalesque, calling it Smith’s last great folly, ‘Who could argue with that? No one
did. Rather it was ignored’. The only notable omission from the program assembled
in the text is deeper discussion of this unfashionable concept of the Formalesque.
McLean chooses the word ‘folly’ as an insurance policy. It could be a dismissive
judgement, as ‘folly’ means ‘foolish act’, but ‘folly’ also has another meaning, more
like ‘cabaret’. Smith would have preferred a book about him to be solely focused on
his concept of the Formalesque—and I hope that one is on the horizon. One thing
this text shows is that Smith has left behind an oeuvre that, through its examination
of the battles in Australian art, operates like a Bayeux tapestry, and awaits yet
further scholarship.

Ronald Millar, an artist and critic invited to contribute to the collection, accuses
Smith of bigotry and exclusiveness in arguably Smith’s most famous piece of writing,
the provocative *Antipodean Manifesto*, citing Smith’s view that abstract painting
 carried a less tangible connection to life than representational, figurative painting.
Perhaps the *Antipodean Manifesto* is heavy handed. At first, it reads like a plot device
from a Shakespearean play. An orator gives a background, setting the scene with
(figurative) heroes and (abstract) villains poised to spar in an ‘Indian Summer’
(p. 57). The script imagines a feud not unlike that between Capulet and Montague
clans. Unimpressed, Millar accuses Smith of snobbery. However, to be fair, Smith
was always attempting to take into account the vast number of people customarily
left aside by the art world establishment, people who do not attend art exhibition
openings and for whom art does not require decoding. This collection does a great
service by incorporating a range of perspectives like this, which can be unpacked at
a variety of levels, from the academy to the tavern.

The book shines on perhaps the central motif punctuating Smith’s opus. It
illuminates how there are inevitably both advantages and drawbacks to Smith’s
means of addressing issues *philosophically*. Contributors Heather Barker and Charles
Green intimate Smith’s belief was that (formal) ‘freedom’ in art associated with
a then new art ‘centre’ in New York, dislodged figuration from fashion partly due to an irrational fear of the other of Socialist Realism. Smith believed in a transparent connection to one’s ideological surrounds and one’s community. However, the intense light Smith’s thought sheds also dazzled his own view. His clarity of purpose was without question. However, it may be that he did not sufficiently distinguish that camp, which was a mode that comprises some contributions to late modernist art, was at times manifesting the very same social agency, rooted in exactly the sense of community, that he suspected high modernist art to disavow. Perhaps, overzealous to dismiss art that was obliquely codified as flippant or overconfident, Smith’s commitment was also his weakness, as Millar dares to hint.

By collecting Smith’s most significant tracts of text on art, Australia and the cultures they circumscribe, and placing them beside texts written by those inheriting this task, Antipodean Perspective opens Smith’s work to a new, wider audience. Smith survived the period of the slaying of Hegelian methodology because, although he built a system, he focused more on its flows and exchanges, than its compartments and hierarchies, demonstrating as Peter Beilharz notes, in his separate, brilliant biography of Smith, a foreshadowing of the methodologies art history now takes as fundamental tools for understanding the relays of power and identity in a postcolonial paradigm. Rex Butler labels Smith a neo-Hegelian in the introduction, reflecting that it is Smith’s blend of criticality with common sense that makes his work eminently readable.

Smith’s work is engrossing because it conveys how theory and practice are entwined in a relationship that can be simultaneously both a love affair and a wrestling match. He was a vocal pacifist, sought ‘more representative’ institutions (pp. 20, 162) and exposed Fascism and anti-Semitism in the 1940s (p. 36). He cautioned the art museum against bowing to pressure to turn a profit rather than seeking to educate throughout the 1960s, he championed social justice for Aboriginal people into the 1980s and discussed the colonial frontier honestly as one of murder, rape, abduction, servitude and slavery (pp. 190, 193). Near the end, one afternoon in his terraced house at 168 Nicholson Street, Fitzroy, he spoke to me of the reverence he had for John Ruskin, whose 39 volumes lined his study, which is an opus, that, he said, still inspired him to keep working into his nineties. His work is a doorway to similarly vast thinking as that of Ruskin and Antipodean Perspective is a doorway into Smith’s thinking. The short-passage format makes it as accessible as Harrison and Wood’s classic Art in Theory, and equally a tome for the ‘time-poor’ or those who tend to find themselves needing to compile a lecture or write an essay in a single evening.

In his autobiography, Smith writes of the garden of his childhood foster home: ‘so that had I not written this down no trace of that garden would have survived.’ Although he refers to the Japanese plum tree, the loquat trees, the Jerusalem artichokes and various types of roses forming an Arcadian frame to his childhood
in Sydney, he could equally have been describing the oeuvre that he left behind. Australian art history is a field that his scholarship filled with an abundance of still-fruiting, organised labours. Smith insisted on disclosing it to be a rich and varied world that all art historians and artists should feel at home in, nurtured by and free to critique. Often misunderstood in his lifetime, this book offers to return Smith to a prominent position in the discourse of Australian art history.