

URBAN DINGO



The premature death of Koori artist Lin Onus at the age of 47 in 1996 was a serious loss to Aboriginal and Settler art worlds. The artist died while in his artistic prime, surrounded by blank canvases and contemplating a new series of works. Margo Neale, the curator of the groundbreaking Emily Kngwarreye retrospective, has now put together an exhibition of Onus' work with an accompanying publication, *Urban Dingo: The Art and Life of Lin Onus 1948-1996*. Onus deserved such recognition, and both the exhibition and publication will encourage further analysis of an unpredictable and multi-faceted artist.

There are major differences between Kngwarreye and Onus and their respective exhibitions. With Kngwarreye the retrospective summed up her life's work as a painter and confirmed, without question, her status as major artist. While questions of the authenticity/inauthenticity of some of her works remain, Kngwarreye's significance is fully established. Onus is a different case. The high modernist aesthetics which translate Kngwarreye's paintings for a fine art market are less applicable to his work. Onus appropriately described himself as being from the 'bower bird' school, and

not surprisingly brought popular elements and overt politics into his art.

Appropriately *Urban Dingo* looks at Onus from a range of perspectives. Sylvia Kleinert situates Onus in the context of Koori art in Victoria; Gary Foley provides a political history of Onus; there is a discussion of Onus as an Aboriginal post modernist by Ian Mclean; Bernard Luthi looks at Onus as a cultural translator in the international arena; and a reminiscence of a friendship and artistic collaboration is offered by Michael Eather. Tiriki and Jo Onus conclude by providing an all-encompassing chronology of the artist's life and career. Notwithstanding the value of these essays and the wealth of information they provide, I believe the contributors would acknowledge that there is still room for further work. Onus remains an enigmatic figure and the evaluation of his life's work is an unfinished project.

Connected through his father Bill Onus to Koori art and politics in Victoria, Onus was also linked, through his Scottish-born mother Mary McLintock Onus, to European society and culture in a manner few Aboriginals of his generation would have experienced. He grew up in a family where European high culture combined

with contemporary Koori culture. Neale suggests that his 'cross-cultural background afforded him a glimpse through many slightly ajar doors'. In life and art Onus reconciled, or attempted to reconcile, elements which many would have regarded, in an imperfect world, as mutually exclusive. Foley tells us that in 1971 Onus, Bruce McGuinness and Bob Maza reclaimed Bunwurrung land in Sherbrooke Forest by building a bush hut. The hut was later burnt down by neo-nazis. In contrast three years later Onus applied for the position of Station Officer with the Country Fire Authority; after three months of competitive examinations and assessments Onus arrived at the final interview only to be put in his place with the words, "Onus, Onus . . . are you any relation to that Abo up in the hills?" Onus shouldn't have been surprised and it was an incident many Aboriginals would simply have walked away from, but he persevered as a volunteer firefighter for the CFA.

If Onus was complex as a person and as an artist his support for Aboriginal artists and communities was uncomplicatedly generous. One of his most important contributions, and one which I think is under-emphasized in *Urban Dingo*, was made as Chair of the Aboriginal Arts Board of the Australia Council. Quite simply, when he took over the Board was on the brink of disintegration, beset by scandals and failing in its responsibility to serve indigenous artists. Onus' leadership helped save it, and the Australia Council

and Aboriginal arts are in his debt. As Chair one of Onus' best qualities was his collegiality. He was unfailingly generous to other artists and a believer in a freemasonry of artists which could connect across cultures. This underpinned his relationship with Maningrida painter Jack Wunuwun and his family; and Onus wrote an important essay "Language and Lasers" which talked of the reciprocal exchange between Aboriginal artists from 'urban' and 'traditional' cultures.

If there is a shortcoming in *Urban Dingo* it would be because none of the artist's early work is reproduced or discussed. In the 1980s I remember seeing some of those paintings hanging in the offices of Koori organizations in Victoria and being impressed by them.

A future project would be to locate and catalogue as many of these works as possible before they are lost. The resonances of those sensitive, understated paintings of river landscapes and bunyips can be found in what I regard as the best of his later works.

Urban Dingo contains a range of paintings and artworks from the late 1980s through to a masterful 1996 painting "Baru ga Warrinyu (Crocodile and fruit bats - waiting for lunch)". My inclination is towards those works which show Onus' painterly skills, and particularly his ability to represent water and light to provoke hypnogogic affects. Appropriately *Urban Dingo* opens with one such painting, the

magnificent 1995 landscape "Bir Warrarra, Bama (Red sunset at Barmah)", and includes further examples like "Birrikala Djini Bunarong Bugaja (Butterflies in Sherbrooke Forest, 1993)".

Though the meeting with Maningrida artist Jack Wunuwun had profound consequences for Onus as a man, the superimposition of traditional motifs in his work often strikes me as heavy-handed. In "Gilgirri Rruki, 1991-92)" traditional motif, composition and whimsy are all effectively combined, though the striking "Jimmy's Billabong" (hung in the National Gallery) seems less nuanced in the manner it creates its effects. Onus does not always succeed in integrating the conceptual aspects of his works into his painterly vision. As a portraitist Onus also had shortcomings. The 1995 painting of Gary Foley (which includes John Laws and Jeff Kennett) has been acclaimed; there has even been a suggestion that it should have won the Archibald prize. Yet here Onus struggles as a draughtsman and resorts to visual clichés as a background. Similar

criticisms could be made of the 1996 painting "Archie Roach, Ruby Hunter & Mr T".

The point of making these observations, which relate to only a small part of his total work, is that Onus' achievements as an artist are significant enough to withstand pertinent criticism without any diminution of his importance. The last thing his work deserves is for a premature critical orthodoxy to establish itself, and the touring retrospective exhibition will provide the opportunity for further critique. ~

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