The Work of Peter Booth

AN INTUITIVE ARTIST OF UNCOMPROMISING VISION

IN HIS LATEST exhibition in Sydney, at Olsen Irwin gallery, Peter Booth was keen to show his drawings and works on paper together, echoing important shows he had earlier in his career at Pinacotheca Gallery Melbourne, where unframed works were pinned to the walls. This simple style of presentation added to the immediacy of the works, making them accessible to the viewer in a very intimate and tactile way.

Booth’s works are so personal, which is probably what makes them so relevant. They seem far outside the taste-maker’s view of art with their openness or lack of self-censorship and their deep insights to the soul. The artist probably doesn’t even intend any social commentary at all – he is an intensely private individual, who doesn’t do interviews and would not be interested in what you or I thought. These are works that come from a personal need – they’re responses to his inner thoughts and experiences. Booth is a brave artist. I’m not aware of many other artists in recent times, particularly in Australia, who have continually revealed visions of such intense personal expression... maybe we could mention Nolan, Boyd, Whisson or DanilaVassileff, but Booth’s works are more otherworldly.

Born in Sheffield in 1940, Booth grew up in an unforgiving environment in the tough industrial British city - a childhood he once described as somewhat “lacking support”. He has said one of his earliest memories was the view from his window of the fiery blasts of an industrial furnace flashing against a blackened sky. This image has often recurred in his work. When he was 18 years old his family migrated to Australia where he worked at various labouring jobs.

STORY

STEVE LOPES
From 1962 to 1965 he studied painting at the National Gallery Art School, Melbourne. Upon graduating he became a full-time painting teacher at Prahran Technical College, as well as teaching evening drawing classes at the National Gallery school. Later on, he worked as a technical assistant at the National Gallery of Victoria where he was exposed to a wonderful collection of William Blake prints that had a mesmerising impact on him. He taught many Melbourne artists in his popular drawing and painting classes and now lives and paints in a bayside suburb of Melbourne.

Booth’s images come from a rich visual experience, from his childhood and dreams. His work has often been labelled as pessimistic, but this reputation has faded over the years with a more sublime interpretation of his environment and more subdued painted landscapes or quieter peopled works as opposed to the earlier fiery, wastelands of the late ’70s and ’80s. It’s evident from his recent works, however, that the rage and dark visions still burn. Maybe they embody Booth’s perception of a society hell bent on ruining itself; the destructive forces of man. But these responses reflect his innermost emotions and may be more a re-affirmation or belief in himself.

He puts his heart and soul into each work as if it’s his last. The drawings are passionate displays of technical complexity – more than a lumbering application of charcoal, mixed media, pastel and crayon. Booth often has no preconceptions about his work, but is directed primarily by mood and emotion at the time of creation. Often it’s the smaller works that have the most illuminating presence, where the gestural movement of smaller strokes or marks add fuel to the emotional turmoil or darkness on display. Though they may be slightly restricted, a Jewel-like quality and speed of execution aids his success in capturing a particular feeling or moment.

The use of black is a grounding point to a lot of the works, whether they are drawings or oils. The black is where other colours derive their eventual intensity and key illuminatory hue. The combination of limited colour and compositional sense of ‘emptiness’ – a use of space that harks back to his earlier abstract work – imbues the works with a contemplative air.

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Unlike his paintings, these drawings exhibit a certain intimacy that comes from the diary-like mark making. Each one represents an intense and solitary journey, much like the artist's career, which has survived the rigours of the art world seemingly without diverging from its intended course.

Peter Booth is about impact, and what is apparent here is an uncompromised, undiluted efficiency. What can at times seem crude is actually a well considered impulse to convey a narrative. There really is a magical understanding of what can be achieved through spirit, and also an intuitiveness that is above the ordinary.

Peter Booth is represented by Olsen Irwin, Sydney

www.olsenirwin.com.au

EXHIBITION
New Works
26 June to 14 July
Olsen Irwin

01 Drawing 2012 (figure in landscape with bottle), 2012, pastel on paper, 27 x 48.5cm
02 Drawing 2012 (Man and dog), 2012, pastel on paper, 21 x 27cm
03 Drawing 2004 (six men with white sun), 2004, pastel on paper, 14 x 23cm
04 Drawing (tree, road and pink sun), 2012, pastel on paper, 30 x 48cm

Courtesy the artist and Olsen Irwin