



**Diploma Lecture Series 2011**  
**Art and Australia II: European Preludes and Parallels**

***The not charming Charm School***

**Craig Judd**

**15/16 June 2011**

**Lecture summary:**

In 1966 Robert Hughes first book "A History of Australian Art" was pulped due to complaints about certain statements and the author's distaste for "its more egregious naivetes" (Preface 1969, 2nd ed., Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970). One wonders what he did say. The 1970 edition in now familiar style is an exciting opinionated read. Hughes enjoys the grand sweep, the all encapsulating frame.

One of the more problematic concepts he introduces to readers is the "The Sydney Charm School" where he claims that art made in Sydney in the period c1940–1955 is somehow less worthy than the works produced in Melbourne, it is saccharine sweet, artificial, decorative and over romantic; the product of isolated misplaced personalities.... unlike the truthful vital energy of Melbourne.

It all depends on your vantage point. In Geoffrey Dutton's book, *The Innovators*, Donald Friend commented:

Melbourne during the war and after the war went in quite heavily for social realism, which is a kind of expression of resentment against being poor and other people being poor. Sydney artists were poor. They enjoyed themselves in their attics. They were drinking plonk and eating crusts of bread ... the usual thing ... We didn't think of resenting it. We had a bloody marvellous time and we did all sorts of interesting things. Sydney extroverted sort of things—plenty of laughter and plenty of laughter in the paintings (p99-100).

This lecture gives a more nuanced overview of some art made in Sydney c1940–1955 by a range of generations. It looks briefly at the role of the AGNSW, private patronage and the intertwined Sydney Group and the Merioola Group – Eric Wilson, Mary (Edwards) Edwell Burke, Donald Friend, Russell Drysdale, Margaret Olley, William Dobell, Jean Bellette, Roland Strasser, Peter Kaiser, H.Tatlock Miller, Jocelyn Rickards, Loudon Sainthill, Sali Herman, Adrian Feint, Arthur Fleischman, Eileen Haxton

**Slide List:**

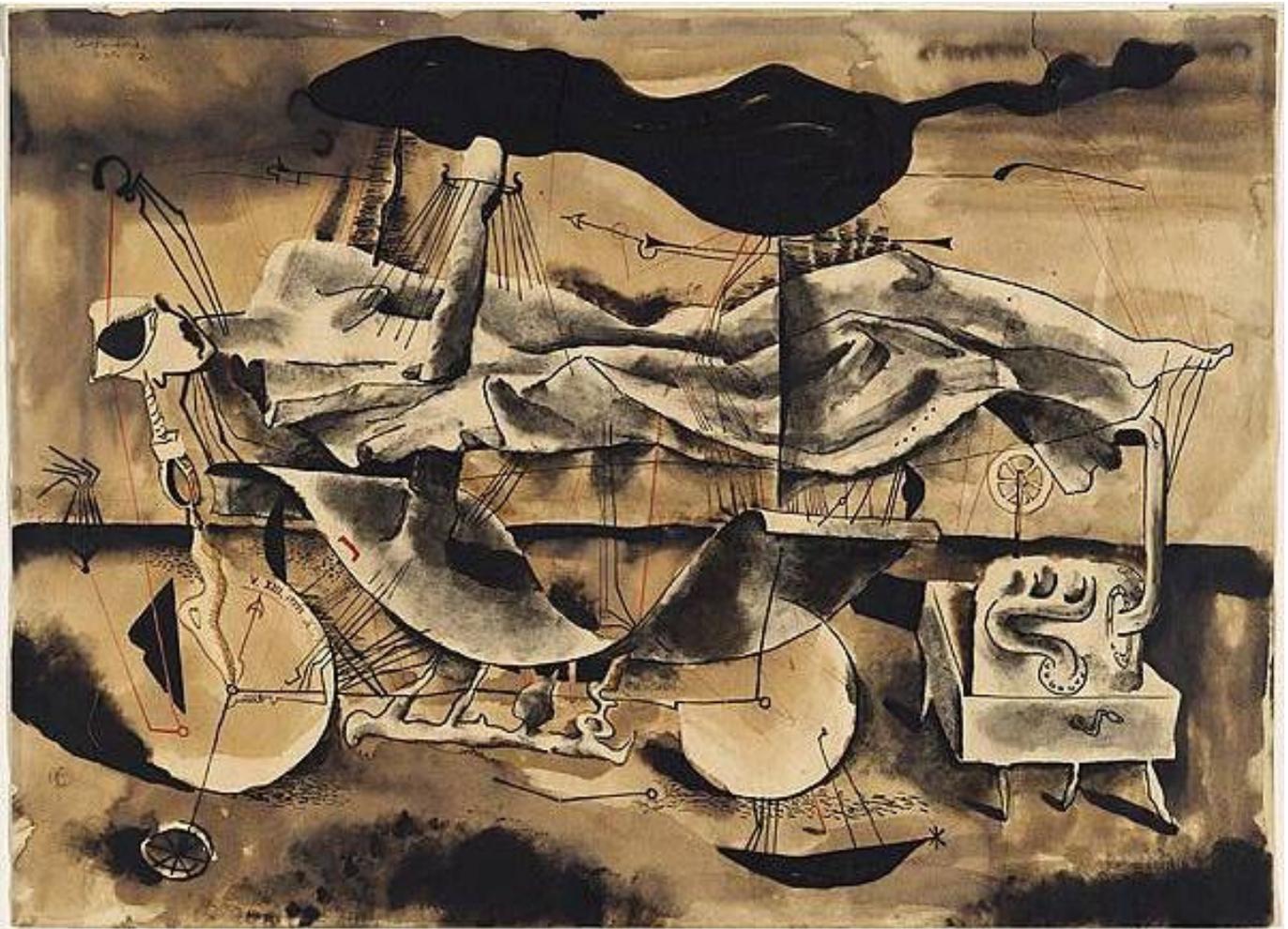
- \*1. Mary Edwell Burke (1894–1988) *Chef Mazar* (1952) oil on canvas Art Gallery of New South Wales
- \*2. Donald Friend (1915–1989) *The Secret Weapon* (1942) pen and ink National Gallery of Australia, Canberra
- \*3. Sali Herman (1898–1993) *McElhone stairs* National Gallery of Australia, Canberra
- \*4. Jocelyn Rickards (1924–2005) Costumes film still from *Blow Up* directed by Antonioni 1966

**Bibliography:**

- Peter Craven, "Times arrow: An Interview with Robert Hughes" The Monthly November 2006 (can be viewed online)
- Patricia Anderson, "Robert Hughes: The Australian Years" Pandora 2009
- Christine France, "Merioola and after" National Trust SH Ervin Gallery 1986
- Geoffrey Dutton "The innovators: the Sydney alternatives in the rise of modern art, literature and ideas" Macmillan 1986



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