**Stephen Orr *Incredible Floridas* Wakefield Press book launch at Carclew, Adelaide, Thursday 23 November 2017**

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Why do novelists write about artists and the world of art?

It’s a fair question because there it’s a well – established genre with historical form.

Consider: Emile Zola’s classic *L’Oeuvre (The Work/Masterpiece)*, (1886) which like Stephen Orr’s *Incredible Florida* takes as a starting point, a well-known artist – in Zola’s instance, Paul Cézanne, Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Grey* (1890), Joyce Carey: *The Horse’s Mouth* (1944), John Berger*, A Painter of Our Time* (1958), Irving Stone, *The Agony and the Ecstasy* (1961) and *Lust for Life* (1934). More recently there have been a swag of novels that look at art or society through the prism of real or imagined artists including: Tracey Chevalier, *Girl with a Pearl Earing* (1999), Claire Messud, *The Woman Upstairs* (2013), Donna Tartt, *The Goldfinch* (2013)*,* Ali Smith, *How to Be Both* (2014*)*, Don DeLillo, *Underworld* (1997).

Australia has made its own distinctive contributions including: Peter Carey, *Theft: A Love Story* (2006) and Patrick White: *The Vivisector*, (1970).

I suspect the reason writers are drawn to artists as subjects is that some lead interesting lives. Consider the ongoing public fascination with figures including Vincent van Gogh, Francis Bacon, Ai Weiwei, Andy Warhol, Tracey Emin and in Australia, Brett Whiteley. It’s the total package audiences are drawn to underlaid by the assumption that art works are windows on talent and genius. And that brings us to *Incredible Floridas*. Stephen admits that the historical figure of Russell Drysdale fueled the idea of writing about not so much him, but the idea of him, as a kind of artist. Roland Griffin in his book, bears a close resemblance to the real life Russell Drysdale who, along with other artists, notably, Sidney Nolan and Arthur Boyd, dominated Australian landscape art in the post WW2 era. What propelled Drysdale’s’ imagery in to the public imagination was that he gradually populated his arid, some say, mutant landscapes, with Australians: Aborigines standing their ground and staring white society down, stockmen, cooks, diggers, rabbit trappers, families and above all battlers – the people he saw, sketched and photographed on his expended travels in land to the Top End from the 1950s onwards.

Through the agency of a fictional artist (Griffin) Orr deflects our gaze from Drysdale’s actual paintings with their seductive dramatics to the workings of a creative artist’s mind. In doing so he transports a kind-of Drysdale narrative into the realm of art with all its surprises and contradictions. Griffin’s circumstance epitomizes the post WW2 Australian art world scene where figurative artists, like Drysdale, were confronted with a global trend to abstraction – something which caused him, and many of his contemporaries to stop in their tracks and question if it was still possible for images sourced from everyday life, to have any power to mean anything. Add to this, the push back that expressionist and surrealist artists faced from a conservative public, pining for their lost blue and gold Australian Impressionist arcadias. That’s the back story. So yes, is does enhance the reading of *Incredible Floridas* to know how courageous artists were in this era in turning their back on comforting myths of nationhood. But you don’t have to get very far into Stephen’s compelling narrative to appreciate that it’s really about the total package, about being an artist and also a husband and father. The business of trying to be an artist often occupies centre stage. The incessant need to keep producing work, find suitable subjects, satisfy dealers and the like. To constantly battle the indifference and ignorance of people around him who wondered why he didn’t get a proper job. Or believe, as one character says of his, that it’s all dogs rooting fence posts. Good for hanging in dentist’s waiting rooms.

Then the heartland of the novel, his struggle (and that of his wife Ena) to continue to love and understand their son Hal throughout the destructive journey his demons lead him.

The manner in which the author constructs a sense of fractured relationships between family members and Roland and Hal the son in particular has the hallmarks of Drysdale outback townscape where everyone is watching each other, straining for some line, even a word that might lead to some authentic exchange of feelings. The frustration that Griffin feels as an artist is mirrored in the fragmented exchanges with Hal as he – once again- lashes out in tormented anger at everything and everyone around him. The depths are reached when Hal, on a North End trip, fires a gun which brings his father running. ‘I heard a shot’ Roland says. Hal’s bitter response ’You couldn’t paint a corpse.

We are into the book almost 300 pages before Stephen rewards us with an extended exchange between father and son, on the road to Ayers Rock (Uluru). ‘At some point Roland felt the desire to hug him but knew that his son wouldn’t let him.’ All he wanted, as the text says was ‘to make him happy, make a journey for him and meet him on the other side.’

And so the narrative unfolds – sometimes driven by the thoughts that spring to Roland’s mind and by others. These are classic ‘watcher on the cast iron balcony’ interludes with characters swapping roles between observing and being observed. They occur like cinematic jump cuts that underscore the fragmentary nature of relationships. In these exchanges both Roland’s take on his art, his family and life is exposed to the core. So too are the contradictions of Hal’s own state of mind which swings wildly from savant insights which go to the heart of the matter and inchoate rage.

Now, if I was writing this book I would have been tempted to get Rimbaud in to the act about midway and toss this brew of uncertainty and trauma into some metaphysical thermo mix and spin it into some mythic dish. But in keeping Rimbaud at bay – apart from the book’s title and referencing that author’s *Drunken Boat* (and also Drysdale’s depiction of a boy with a boat) when Roland shows him how to make a paper boat (‘as fragile as a butterfly in May’) the author takes us to a real ‘there’, one that can be recognised in the laconic language of what used to be known as working class Australians ( whatchername, you gonna getta hiding) and numerous references to an Adelaide ( based in part on the author’s own Thebby childhood) that has slowly slipping below the horizon such as ‘schizos’ (as Hal is name-called) being sent to Glenside, the Cheltenham racetrack, cheap lino from McLeay’s, Lawlers the White Ant People, making apricot jam, wet sour sobs, half –empty salt and pepper shakers on old country pubs, the drive in, jacarandas and blue stone gutters – and , one of the most evocative sketches in the book, ‘dozens of bored children falling from monkey bars into a sea of wild oats’ ( Rimbaud – match that!). Then there are the broader mindsets of a bye gone era such as Hal’s response to school speaking for many (‘I hate the place - the shit about Hastings and Nefertiti’), to this the enduring idea that somehow, the inland desert experience cures all ills – the idea that Hal would be OK if ‘you could get him under the stars, talk, keep busy.’ ‘Sort him out’.

Through this fascinating counter posing of aspiration and reality aspects of what it means to lead a creative life appear. This life is often messy and holds no promises beyond the next act, the next painting – or book. In the end Roland had no clear idea of why he was ‘doing it’. ‘Except that a man had to do something to stop himself from going mad.’ Forget talent and genius. This is as ordinary and basic as it gets

Francis Bacon once said that ‘Painting has become, all art has become, a game by which man distracts himself. And you might say that it has always been like that, but now it’s entirely a game. What’s fascinating is that it’s getting more difficult for the artist. He must really deepen the game to be any good at all so he can make life a bit more exciting’. I rather like Hal’s perspective, ‘There were millions of things to do in life, but all you needed was one thing you were good at, and could bear repeating every day.’

In this regard, Stephen, in continuing to write, you have obviously come to terms with your destiny. And we are all the beneficiaries. Congratulations on *Incredible Floridas* – this not so crumpled paper boat is now launched.

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