



Willem de Kooning's *Standing Figure*, 1969-84, which was unveiled on 29 October, in the forecourt of the Victorian Arts Centre. The bronze, which stands 3.6 m high, has been presented to Australia by National Australia Bank as a bicentennial gift. The work cost US\$375,000.

Diary

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I spent a short four-and-a-half months in Japan, so don't want to sound authoritative about what's going on there. I do not speak Japanese. But it was a sort of mad adventure where, to some extent, one surrenders to circumstance. I was constantly stimulated in my surroundings and experienced a strong sense of unspoken communication with people. My triggers were commonly visual, linked to expanding internal dialogues which drew me back to my own cultural position. I suspect, though, according to one's frame of mind, experiences could be extraordinarily different; to some people this environment is exceedingly hostile.

I went to Japan at the end of December, 1986, as the inaugural artist-in-residence at the Tokyo studio of the then Visual Arts Board. I had a degree of independence in which to experience an alien status in the everyday as well as the status of a representative of the VAB in Japan. This last I accepted, as people insisted on introducing me in this capacity. After all, it's hard to have to speak to a foreigner in their language; many of us in Australia wouldn't be able to start, so I found a certain security in my introductions and enjoyed friendly if mainly gestural conversations and an ease of entry around a portion of the Tokyo art scene.

Perhaps it is Buddhism which gives Japanese people their acceptance of extremes and a depth of understanding of projections, either willed or withheld. There is the normal and then there is the unpredictable. Ideally one is balanced in a sort of continuous present.

This is more experiential than intellectual, but I suspect points to a quality elusive but essential in the gathering together of elements in a painting. It is like plucking colours as they pass by; conversely it is like plotting structures on an inert surface through which the colours fly.

Again, calligraphy, like the refinements of Japanese music, peels from walls and boundaries; moves within confined spaces with a flowing, linear logic. Always describing an abstract space which becomes almost visible, defined by the movement within its boundaries. In this way, the intensity/pitch of a sound or movement can be pushed to extremes. A constant checking of familiar patterns of repetition as soon as recognised.

The loss of emotional depth in much traditional art in favour of clever spatial illusions struck me forcefully when I saw the travelling exhibition called 'Space in European Art' in Tokyo. It included Italian Renaissance masterpieces by painters such as Titian, as well as Greek archaic sculptures of Kore.

I rediscovered something deep and real out of my own cultural background in the midst of the Japanese seduction. There are, however, exceptions in the area of human figuration, such as the powerful wood or lacquered clay Buddhist portrait

sculptures of the 7th-12th centuries. These I found emotionally intense, displaying an outer simplicity based on a centrally balanced form, which drew attention to a gathering of energy. They were capable of holding the view in a religious transference.

I was told on several occasions that Japanese people are generally not very good at verbally expressing abstract concepts. Whether or not that is so in direct language, I noticed anywhere I went the most superb illustrations of abstract expression in everyday things. I was constantly triggered by these signs. Juxtapositions and rearrangements which drew attention to fabric and meaning. I think this comes from a quite natural belief on the part of Japanese people in the spirit or energy in all things.

To some degree a Western person could call this symbolism, in the way that an object might recall an idea or quality. But here, I think, an object can reflect its history, where it comes from and what it is related to and people generally understand that and use objects in this way all the time. They take this knowledge for granted.

I sat down in an obscure part of the garden around the ancient Buddhist temple complex near Nara, called Horyuji. There was a tiny altar cut in the rock and flowing water. As I settled, I was drawn to the sound. A thread of water falling off a ledge on to a rock platform eight feet below. The water hit the flat rock as if it were touching a hotplate. The continuous crack of this sound was penetrating and induced quietness of body, together with multiple, overlapping thoughts. I wondered at the purposeful way this fall of water had been arranged and how quickly I turned to philosophical thoughts. The thread of water was so sharply defined, so finely tuned in its spread, that it could equally be flowing upwards as I looked at it. A simple device concentrated out of a natural phenomenon which was almost magic.

Then there was cherry blossom time. Cherry trees are grey and spindly in winter; you would hardly notice them. But the blossom simply explodes on the bare twigs on a certain day in early spring. Faintly pink petals, luminous in semi-darkness, surround the trees in an overblown haze. People behave like our New Year. There are thousands drunk in the streets, with all-night picnics and sentimental songs on the concrete of Ueno park.

Some understanding of the intensity of the ritual came clear a few days later as the petals began to fall. I saw a mother stop with her daughter, perhaps four years, and point up at the drifting petals. I saw snowflakes. Need it be said. We are still attached to the earth, amongst all this concrete and traffic, and the season has turned at last.

Amongst contemporary Japanese

artists, I think understandably, as they meet with and are confronted by art from round the world, there is a strong desire to break with all that domestic tradition and to surprise, shock, as well as seduce. I imagine also that Japanese artists who are successful in their own country want to know why they are not seen as the equal of successful artists in New York or Paris. They want to understand what the valued qualities really are, for instance, in contemporary North American art, and they want to be up there too.

In many ways the contemporary scene is still very much a subculture, surrounded by imitations of the art of late 19th-century France or the indigenous Sumi-e and Nihonga painting. This is still where the money is.

Inevitably, however, fragments of tradition are present in the work of the so-called avant-garde artists, mixed with references to exotic styles.

They have to work hard to avoid parodying themselves. There is, among younger artists, an acute awareness of self-consciousness, and indeed this can be an uncomfortable aspect of all stages of Japanese art, leading to extreme over-refinement. So they are creating juxtapositions, ephemeral environments and fragments of works with a variety of optional resolutions. But the current work shows a mixture of traditional and outrageous elements which seem to signal commitment to change; the overcoming of cultural restraints and the resistance of a largely unsupportive society.

I saw an imaginary re-creation of Van Gogh's studio, with all the accretions of easels, paint-laden palettes, splashes of paint on the floor, a yellow chair, earthenware jugs of sunflowers, and framed Japanese prints. A bizarre recollection of 19th-century rural England assembled by a young Japanese man called Barbara and Emily. There were burning candles, wispy draperies, glasses



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of water, daisies, and landscape paintings with rainbows and English poems. A sculptor makes large-scale motorbikes out of jellybeans which melt in the heat. Ikebana masters arrange massed banks of vivid colour using thousands of fresh peonies and camelias held together with spiked wires, or they web the gallery space in wire-jointed reeds and fine bamboos. Two of the most interesting shows were kinetic environments of wires and electronic components which blinked and chattered on activation of trip wires. Ironically these constructions had the look of carefully arranged still lifes.

The tiny spaces of the Ginza galleries are available for exhibition, usually for one week, at a rental of approximately A\$2,000. Most artists I met were doing jobs like teaching or producing artwork for advertising on an occasional basis and living with their parents. Some of the older male artists were being supported by their wives.

In the younger group, women artists are forming loosely supportive groups,

and gallery owners are frequently women. Most of the women artists are under thirty-five. I suspect there are severe social tensions as some of these women are selected for the coveted and sparse public exhibitions. They are careful to remain modest and unassertive in public and look after their friends. You don't see these women drinking saké in public with the boys. There is no doubt, though, that the breadth and range of experimentation going on now goes hand in hand with the numbers of women entering the scene. There is so much fresh art being made in Tokyo. Most of it is also quite ephemeral, intended to last the week of the show, then carefully photographed and dismantled.

In spite of the explosive and deconstructive nature of much of the interesting contemporary art work in Tokyo, I found the cultural environment really supportive of my instinct for exploration and testing of the interactions of my materials. Of drawing back and observing natural conditions in interaction within controlled parameters.

I was able to select and experiment with Japanese papers which have barely detectable differences until worked with, when water absorbency and slight textural differences affect the spread of paint. I discovered Japanese colour pigments, which are similar to those in other parts of the world in many cases, but some of the reds and blues I found unique, exhibiting subtle variations in refraction and transparency. The wide range of hues also dispenses with multiple mixing which always tends to dull the colour. There is also a real, natural earthiness about some of those brilliant colours.

So I feel that with the natural quality of the colour pigments and the receptive papers I was able to draw back and observe the interaction of the colours on the damp surface, effecting a spontaneous emergence of energy within the organised and structured ground.