

PAINTING AND MEMORY

*Evening Shadows, Cockatoo Island,
45 x 100 cm acrylic on canvas*



For artist JEFF RIGBY a love of structure gives a sense of narrative, documenting economic and social change

Form, structure and space lie at the heart of most landscape and architectural imagery, whether it is a mountain range or an industrial complex



Top:
Shadows,
Cockatoo Island
70 x 70 cm
acrylic on canvas

Opposite page:
St Katarinen
Refueling
60x60cm
acrylic on canvas

OUR FAMILY HOME was on a large block in Warrawee surrounded by huge blackbut and ironbark trees, a remnant of the great forest that once covered much of the upper North Shore of Sydney.

My parents had diverse interests, including gardening, art, books and music, but my father in particular was unwilling to throw anything away, creating a somewhat chaotic but wonderfully stimulating and creative environment where there was always something unusual and interesting to look at.

Our study was a cool, quiet room lined from floor to ceiling with books on many subjects. There were a number of fascinating objects scattered about on the shelves, including some fossilised sections of ancient trees, old family photos and a small half model of the sailing ship that brought the Rigby family from England.

As a boy of eight or nine I delighted in all these things, but I was especially excited by a faded postcard of *Bailed Up* by Tom Roberts, with its bushranging theme and menacing figures on horseback confronting the impassive coach driver while others ransacked the

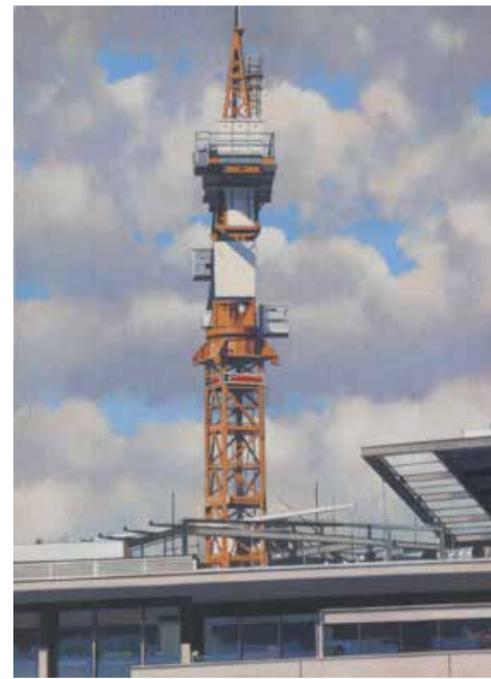


Left:
 Hammerhead
 Crane, Garden
 Island
 60 x 64 cm acrylic

Right: Construction,
 Walsh Bay, 25x30
 cm, acrylic on
 canvas

Opposite page top:
 The *Coral Sea*
 approaching Ball's
 Head Bay
 100 x 160 cms
 acrylic on canvas

Below:
 Sutherland Dock,
 Cockatoo Island
 (2nd state)
 45 x 75 cms acrylic
 on canvas



coach. The scene reminded me very much of a stretch of road that we sometimes drove along between Wisemans Ferry and St. Albans. Even in the 1950s this locality seemed eerily remote, a place from another time where a small boy could easily imagine a holdup.

As an adult I was to experience this recognition again and again along other country roads, a testament to the universality of Roberts' expression of the crackling dryness of a scrubby hillside, silent and brooding in the heat in contrast with the drama unfolding on the road below. Over the years I realised that *Bailed Up* had helped me to understand the power of painting as a means of expressing the context of our lives and our relationship with the environment around us, often viewed through the prism of memory. Even today I still have a print of *Bailed Up* pinned on my studio wall.

My parents Alan and Enid Rigby were commercial artists, beginning their careers in the 1920s and their skills included formal drawing, layout, hand lettering, scraperboard, pen and ink, watercolour and other associated skills. Many artists like Lloyd Rees, Roland Wakelin and even the American, Edward Hopper, worked in commercial art to earn a living and so perhaps the boundaries between the commercial and fine art worlds were more blurred than they are now. Certainly in Hopper's case, some of his early commercial illustrations seem to foreshadow many elements of his later painting.

Brushes, pens and pencils were just part of life for my brothers and me. After dinner my parents usually did a few hours of work and once the schoolwork was finished I would busy myself with drawing. Very little was taught directly by our parents, perhaps just a comment now and again, but there was always a strong sense of purpose and engagement, powerful for a child and essential for any artist.

An aspect of my parents' work was the need to amass reference material for the production of layout and finished art, helping them keep up with the styles and trends of the day. They collected popular magazines and newspapers, mostly American but some English and Australian and they were never thrown out even if they were decades old, just becoming part of the general clutter. There were in various parts of the house piles of *Saturday Evening Post*, *Life* and *Fortune* magazines, *New York Times* and English *Picture Posts*, the latter reflecting life in wartime England which made fascinating reading.

My brothers and I would trawl through these publications, each according to his interests and in retrospect the very high quality illustrations in the features and advertisements of those old publications had a big impact on me. The beautiful formalism of the Art Deco style of production in the older material probably leached into my psyche, to reappear many years later in another form. However, for better or for worse and despite this treasure trove, I did not follow my parents into the commercial world of endless briefs and deadlines, but eventually found myself at the National Art School, East Sydney Technical College, as a painting student.

My preoccupations as an artist have always been with landscape and architecture which again was to a great extent shaped by family interests. My father had begun training as an architect around 1917 but after some years switched to commercial art because of his family's lack of financial resources to support his studies. However, he retained a great interest in architecture and building all his life and fortuitously, as a student of architecture at Sydney Technical College, he met Myles J. Dunphy, an architect and lecturer at the school. From around 1910 until his death in 1985, Myles Dunphy worked tirelessly for the preservation of the

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natural environment and is now regarded as the father of the NSW National Parks system.

It was the beginning of a life-long friendship that introduced my father to bushwalking and the concept of nature conservation which became a consuming passion for the rest of his life, as it was to be for my mother and all their closest friends, a full 50 years before these concerns became mainstream. It was inevitable that my elder brothers and I would in turn be introduced to camping and bushwalking at a very early age and that we would come to regard the bush as a second home, developing a strong awareness of the spirituality and romance of landscape.

Our father's office was in Kyle House, Macquarie Place in Sydney, with a commanding view from the Heads to the Harbour Bridge and the constant parade of shipping and harbour traffic. Until the 1980s, with increasing containerisation, shipping together with its infrastructure and traditions was a fundamental part of Sydney life. There seemed to be a direct relationship between the city and the blue-collar pursuits of the docks and wharves and in the absence of cheap air travel, the population at large was more connected with the sea and ships. It was a grittier, dirtier place and looking back it seems to have been somehow more real.

The late 1950s and 1960s was a period of intense redevelopment and the beginning of the high rise Sydney we know today. I clearly remember standing alongside my father peering into excavations, fascinated and awed by the huge scale and drama of construction. Over time, however, I was also made aware of the destruction of a considerable part of the old, largely sandstone city, usually flagged by the ubiquitous sign saying *Whelan The Wrecker Was Here*.

Sadly, a typical scene was the beautiful Royal Exchange building on the corner of Bridge and Pitt Streets in the final throes of demolition, with its exquisite spiral cedar staircase reaching up into space while the sandstone walls and columns were being torn down all around it. Equally typical was the banal and undistinguished building of glass and concrete that rose in its place. Included in the destruction were the wool stores on East Circular Quay, so much a part of Sydney's colonial economy, and the dreadful imposition of the Circular Quay Railway and the Cahill Expressway that will forever shut the city away from its harbour.

Perhaps one of the most tragic casualties was *Subiaco*, the house of Hannibal MacArthur of Rydalmere. It was

designed by John Verge and built in 1836 on land called *The Vineyards* which included a much older cottage built before 1800 on the original grant of land. I was taken there as a child in 1961, pending the demolition of these buildings and I seem to recall a date from the 1790s carved over the doorway of the cottage, making it just about the oldest building in Australia. Within months of our visit the house and cottage were levelled to make way for, of all things, a new carpark for the Rheems Company. Such was society's implacable disregard for the city's heritage and history at that time.

Years later Jack Munday, Joe Owens and the Builders' Labourers Federation instituted the Green Bans which heightened awareness and managed to prevent the destruction of Woolloomooloo, Victoria Street, King's Cross and The Rocks. Amazingly, the Queen Victoria Building also narrowly escaped destruction and is now regarded as one of Sydney's architectural treasures.

I am including this history because it has deeply influenced the premise of much of my work on so many levels, whether it is in landscape, industrial landscape or cityscape, often resulting in an unapologetic quality of nostalgia. Over time the work seems to have formed an ongoing sense of narrative, documenting the results of continuous economic and social change. However, while Sydney has been a central theme for many decades, I increasingly find that I am painting a city of memories as it steadily becomes more international and universal at the expense of its innate character.

However, beneath these conscious familial interests and experiences, lies the sort of subconscious agenda which most of us are only dimly aware of and which I believe informs the work of the majority of artists at some level. Perhaps in my case it is a love of structure and more particularly its inferred stability in both an aesthetic and a psychological sense. I can certainly be described as a realist artist, but while it is true that I have a passion for the sense or look of reality, the recording of reality for its own sake is not necessarily my ultimate intention.

Form, structure and space lie at the heart of most landscape and architectural imagery, whether it is a mountain range or an industrial complex, a desert, a cityscape or a tin shed. The dynamics of landscape are perhaps more subtle and open to interpretation while in architecture they are more obvious. Ironically for me, this is never more so than during the processes of construction and demolition when the dynamics of the building are fully revealed, especially when



Finger Wharves Walsh Bay
100 x 105cm acrylic on canvas

enhanced by sunlight and shadow. Regardless of the degree of reality the image may convey, its compositional structure is foremost amongst a number of considerations which support the artist's intention and which are the basic means by which we are able to digest and interpret the image.

Early in my training at the National Art School, then part of the East Sydney Technical College, I discovered the artist Edward Hopper and ever since have found his work of primary importance. The still tension of his images, his remarkable use of the figure, his ability to effortlessly move between internal to external spaces fascinated me. His influence continues to be profound for many artists and certainly in cinema, the very

medium that provided him with so much inspiration in the first place.

Other artists who have helped sustain me have undoubtedly tended towards a formal although not necessarily a realist approach. Arthur Streeton and Tom Roberts have always been important from my very early days, while others, including Elioth Gruner, Roland Wakelin, Ralph Balson, Godfrey Miller, Lloyd Rees, Ian Fairweather and Rosalie Gascoigne, also have relevance for various reasons, perhaps not always immediately obvious. Then perhaps there are the great American illustrators, Howard Pyle and his student N.C. Wyeth, although interestingly not so the latter's son, Andrew Wyeth. The beautiful black and white photography of the

1930s and 40s, typified by Ansel Adams and Max Dupain, first seen amongst my parents' reference material, made a considerable impact as well.

However, influences are notoriously slippery and hard to ascribe and apt to over simplify and misrepresent the artist process. An artist's work will be a subtle blend of his psychological makeup and life experiences and those elements of other artists' work which seem to contain some sort of mutual resonance or affirmation. I am concerned that the widespread and rather self-conscious academic approach to art practice with all its intensely theoretical dialogue may tend to diminish the more intuitive elements of the creative process.

Ultimately others will make their judgements whatever the artist's avowed intentions may be and that is the essential nature of the conversation that artists of all kinds have with society. However, notwithstanding the opinions of academics and commentators or the dictates of the prevailing fashions and trends, the artist must have the strength to take responsibility for his work and accept or reject these judgements and comments on their merits if the integrity of his work is to remain intact.

Jeff Rigby has lived with his wife Kathy Veel in Bullaburra in the Blue Mountains since 1991 and they have a son Kit. The Rigby family has had a long connection with the region through bushwalking since 1921 and Alan Rigby is remembered for starting the campaign to save Blue Gum Forest in 1932.

Jeff Rigby exhibits with the Robin Gibson Gallery and teaches drawing at the National Art School. He is a Trustee of the Kedumba Collection.



Opposite:
Bourke Street Evening
20 x 20cms
acrylic on canvas

Left:
View Down King Street
gouache on paper

Below:
Jeff Rigby (photo
Warren Hinder)

