

TREVOR VICKERS INTERVIEWED BY SALLY QUIN *

Lawrence Wilson Art Gallery | 17 July 2021

Sally Quin: I'll start with a question that relates to the room that we are sitting in [the Westpac Gallery]. Shown here are a number of works by artists who participated in the landmark *The Field* exhibition of 1968, including you Trevor.¹

So around the room we have Dick Watkins, Col Jordan, Sydney Ball, Gunter Christmann and Trevor Vickers. The painting behind me [gestures to Sydney Ball's *Ispahan*, 1967] was actually in *The Field*.

I'd like to talk about the undue emphasis on the influence of American hard-edge and geometric abstraction on the artists associated with *The Field*. As you've previously suggested to me, Trevor, you and others saw the American work in terms of a coalescing of interests and concerns, rather than there being any direct influence.² Can you comment on this?

Trevor Vickers: Yeah, sure. There's been a lot written about the big American show that went through the year before *The Field* show happened.³ One of the curators of *The Field*, John Stringer, actually brought the American curator [Waldo Rasmussen] from the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) through my studio in 1967, when [Stringer] was assessing what they were going to show [in *The Field*].

He [Rasmussen] was saying that he felt that there would be a lot of interest in the show that he was about to bring [to Australia], particularly because there had been no American work shown of its type in Melbourne or Sydney. And he thought that the type of work he had seen from Paul Partos, myself and Peter Booth, he felt that we would enjoy some of the people in the big American show. And that was true, there were three or four people in the show that were working in the same area, namely [Kenneth] Noland, [Frank] Stella, [Barnett] Newman and [Allan] D'Arcangelo. It was that we felt an affinity with these artists, but we weren't influenced. It was already too late. We were well down the path. We might have seen a picture or two in *Studio International* but we'd come a bit far, we were too involved to be taking things out of magazines or newspapers.

Especially Syd [Sydney Ball] who was actually working in New York. He didn't come back until I think just before *The Field* show. So the blanket claim that the American show had a big effect on everybody was just ridiculous.

Sally Quin: And you were also looking at contemporary art from the UK and Europe?

Trevor Vickers: At this time there happened to be some very insightful curators somehow involved with the National Gallery [of Victoria] with connections in London. So we saw a lot of contemporary work from London, or from Britain. *Studio International* was an English art journal Mel Ramsden had put me onto, as well as an experimental publication from the Royal College of Art called 'Arc'.

Sally Quin: What kind of British painting were you looking at?

Trevor Vickers: Well, there were a few interesting abstract works [at the NGV]. I know there was a painting by Henry Mundy that had a very big effect. That piece, it was fantastic. And there was an impressive Spanish work by [Antoni] Tàpies.

Sally Quin: These were part of the collection [of the NGV]? At the old NGV?

Trevor Vickers: Yes. They were keeping up their collection. They weren't able to buy a lot. They certainly didn't buy any American work at that time. That all happened later. The first hard-edge painting I saw in Melbourne was around 1964 when I was working as a telecommunications technician. Mel Ramsden said come down and see a hard-edge painting that was being shown in the basement of a hotel on Russell Street. It was a painting by Janet Dawson [who had returned to Australia from Europe in 1960]. I think the painting came from her time in London. I was immediately interested in the work because it didn't have any figurative aspect.

Sally Quin: And you were in a city with a very strong figurative tradition. Was there a very conscious attempt to move away from that?

Trevor Vickers: With the group I spoke of, yes. My contact was mostly with Paul Partos, Peter Booth and Mel Ramsden. We neither wanted to fit into

the social realism of Counihan, the expressionism of Tucker or the kind of psychological painting of Nolan, painters associated with Bernard Smith or John Reed. We found there was a problem with imagery and all this emotive stuff. We [Booth, Partos, Ramsden] felt that a lot of what was going on in Melbourne was related to economics, trying to please the public. We didn't want anything to do with the [art] market. We wanted to pare things down to visual necessity. There's no imagery in this, the imagery in this painting isn't telling another story: 'This painting is about painting'. That seemed to be a strong part of it.

Sally Quin: Yes.

Trevor Vickers: Mel was particularly good at paring away any romantic thoughts you might have towards painting. One of the things he said to me was try and think of it this way: picture plane/observer/depth of field. What we're involved with are the things going on in front of the canvas, in the brain of the spectator. If you see meaning, you see meaning. Meaning comes from this interaction, it's not something you can put into words. Our visual perception is way beyond anything we can articulate in language. The practitioner needs to find this essence. What was it that Piero had that others around the same time didn't? He captured something mysterious. It's inexplicable. Syd Ball's *Ispahan* has it 'It's loose, it's tight'. There is a transcendent and mystical element.

Peter [Booth] and I were very close and his early abstract work was fantastic. It had a sense of something behind it – giving it more power, an essence there. He got really close to the kind of mystery or transcendence we were seeking through painting when he was starting to do his dream sequences – elemental, spare but tremendously powerful.

Partos did some wonderful stuff but his big jointed-together things [like the type shown in *The Field*], he destroyed. He decided he didn't want to do any of that anymore.

Sally Quin: Booth and Partos were part of the group [the Carlton Push] who congregated in Drummond Street in Carlton? Can you describe the kind of scene you were living in the mid-1960s?

Trevor Vickers: I'd been to a couple of shows at Museum of Modern Art at Heide, John and Sunday Reed's gallery. Sunday had brought a couple of my paintings. I had stayed at the old house at Heide with Sweeney [their adoptive son] and watched the new Heide rise. I was painting in West Melbourne and my paintings were filling up the house. Sweeney was going to open a new gallery [Strines], showing abstract work, it was 1966. He said you need a studio, come and have a look at a place in Carlton, in Drummond Street. There was a big stable at the back of this terrace house and when I was given the keys, it was a big bunch. I said, 'Well, what are all these other keys for?' He said, 'Well, the house comes with it'.

Anyway, so I got the house and this place was gigantic. It had 16 rooms. It was only a short period before a whole lot of other painters had shifted in because they were always after studios or getting chucked out for not paying the rent or whatever. People who lived there included Mike Brown, Paul Partos, Guy Stuart and Robert Hunter. Mel was back in England.

Sally Quin: Yes.

Trevor Vickers: And we were consumed with talking about this idea of the 'essence'. It seemed that everybody was coming to grips with it in a different way. I think I was really fortunate to come across them [Booth, Hunter, Partos]. Melbourne at that time was quite exciting, I mean, in much as there was a feverish sort of dedication to painting.

Sally Quin: So it was a fortuitous decision to leave Perth at 16, and move to Melbourne?

Trevor Vickers: Oh, yes. I learned a lot, painting and living away from home. I was wandering around, when probably I should have been supervised!

Sally Quin: Getting back to relinquishing of the image. Despite this desire, an appreciation of figurative painting is still an essential part of your abstract practice. Would that be correct?

Trevor Vickers: Yes, in as much as to try and resolve getting inside the image, or getting through the image. I ended up, initially, well, it was the mid-60s, working with segmented canvases bolted together. I stuck the

various parts together and it became a sort of image, but the image is the outline. It's a paradox.

Sally Quin: And in terms of colour and scale?

Trevor Vickers: With those early ones, I thought, well, I'll stick to a colour scheme, a spectral split: red, blue, yellow. In 64-65 acrylic paint had only just hit the market and it was thick like an oil paint. You could only use them if you watered them down, but then you would have too little pigment.

So we were making our own paints. I worked with a paint manufacturer for quite a while. To use paint in the quantities that I wanted, you couldn't possibly use tubes of paint. The hardest thing about making your own paint is when you've got a dry pigment, to get it into solution, you need to make a mud and it's a very time-consuming thing.

Sally Quin: Right.

Trevor Vickers: This was high-quality pigment we were buying from the same chemical companies that Windsor and Newton used. Simply talking economically, it helped us a lot. Yes, well, that allowed me to do some fairly large works, which would have been extremely expensive [to make], of course.

Sally Quin: I imagine that the size of works (including yours) was part of the shock of the [*Field*] exhibition, because works of abstraction from the 1950s in Australia, for example, they are mostly small scale, as those shown in the adjacent gallery [gestures to the Maller Gallery].

Trevor Vickers: Yes. Yeah, well, scale was a part of it because from the concept to completion you were chasing a certain thing and because you swept out most of the ingredients that people look for, to get what you want to see, it took a bit of scale. But that only went on for a period, it depended on the studio ...

Sally Quin: Can you comment on the reaction to *The Field*?

Trevor Vickers: Well, of course, a lot of people said those things like, 'I could have done that'. The newspapers said that. But it was a very strong

exhibition, and I think the re-creation of that show a couple of years ago showed that.⁴

Sally Quin: Yes.

Trevor Vickers: And [the public] were disturbed about an abstract show going on as the first show in the brand new gallery, so we became unpopular all round. Well, we thought it was funny at the time. You had to watch where you went. People were arguing. It's very rare that you get a painting exhibition where people will argue in pubs about it, that type of thing.

Sally Quin: Trevor, your approach to making an artwork in the 1960s compared to now, is the method very similar? Do the same problems emerge despite the distance of time and development of technical prowess?

Trevor Vickers: Some of them, yes. Painting is incredibly broad and there are different issues that you start to want to deal with. It's like language you know. You learn the one language you speak, it's where you can be articulate, but you know about a few others, and occasionally, those [languages] come in useful.

Sally Quin: Yes.

Trevor Vickers: Just throw in a different word! In those terms things are still the same really. I get paintings that have to, have to wait. I'm not happy with it, but I don't want to throw it away and one day I can see what was holding me up.

Sally Quin: Okay. So you will leave the paintings for sometimes a period of years?

Trevor Vickers: Sure. Yeah. I can sort of only work on one painting at a time. That's the only way I can do it. If it reaches a sort of stale point, I'll put it aside, but it's there. I think it's important that a painting has a presence. That they actually project a presence, like a personality.

Sally Quin: Yeah. When you observe this painting for an extended period [gestures to Vickers' *untitled*, 1976], it seems to breathe; it has its own energy.

Trevor Vickers: The thing is to get a dynamic without throwing things around.

Sally Quin: The way that you approach the blank canvas, there's already a lot of work that's been done prior to you sitting in front of it. You have used traditional painting methods and materials?

Trevor Vickers: Yeah, well, I was a sort of naïve, amateur painter when I came across Mel Ramsden and Peter Booth, who then went on to go to the National Gallery School together. They taught me how to stretch a canvas, what not to do in terms of paint mixing. So I picked up a lot of craft. And that was important to me, it's still important to me. At the time I was doing an apprenticeship in electronics and telecommunications and painting was my hobby. The craft wasn't as important to them [referring to Booth and Partos]. They'd just get a stretcher, get some canvas, get someone else to stretch it for them, whatever! Whereas, to me, that was part of the mental process, the whole preparation et cetera. Later in the Catalan series [1980s and 1990s] I used a medieval technique, using gesso on panel. You're using rabbit skin glue and you have to cook it. I finally found the correct recipe in a fourteenth-century Italian handbook.

Sally Quin: In this Catalan series you created shaped boards, curved forms.

Trevor Vickers: With gesso panels I could do any shape at all. But what shapes? I had to find shapes that didn't look like a house, a head, a camel. These forms were in part inspired by medieval panel painting in Northern Spain and Southern France, and sculpture in Romanesque churches. I couldn't help but be interested in the dynamic way things were made to fit together [in Romanesque art]. In a way the forms were bouncing off each other, or more like they were stuck together but trying to bounce apart. There was a tension in the Romanesque style that I found fascinating. I didn't have to include religious imagery, I wasn't being paid by the church, but I wanted the dynamic of shape, colour, abstraction I saw in these works.

Sally Quin: And the forms had to fit into the architecture in part?

Trevor Vickers: In some cases, yeah. They were setting themselves impossible tasks and making it dynamic, as you can see in carving on capitals.

Sally Quin: Thank you, Trevor. I think we can open up to questions from the audience now. Would anyone like to ask anything?

Audience One: Thank you, that was wonderful to hear everything you've said. My question is about materials and technique, in particular about the treatment of edges which I think is clearly important in your work.

Trevor Vickers: Sure. One of the things that annoyed me about the early bolted-together canvases was that you had to have two straight lines. I wanted to try and get away from that, loosen up a bit. But curved stretchers don't work, so that's where we ended up in the south of France with gesso on board and curved shapes.

In terms of straight lines, that was one of the things that upset a lot of the older painters too, the masking tape that suddenly these young guns were taking up in painting. But it's quite accepted now. In fact, I visited a painter's studio in Melbourne. He must have had what looked like a haystack of used masking tape, just sort of thrown in the corner!

And my friend, Bob Hunter, he could tell you about every type of masking tape he had bought, and used, but not me. The lines in my paintings aren't straight, I never use masking tape. The wobble is natural, it's a part of it, it gives the painting a life.

Sally Quin: How does drawing come into it, Trevor?

Trevor Vickers: Oh, I love drawing. If you read Paul Klee's notebooks he talks about how a line can be fast, slow, upward – he's talking about essence stuff here and I thought that was fascinating. But it doesn't matter what you plan. You might have done fifteen drawings and have an idea of colour but as soon as you start into the work it leads you down another path – you are fighting to hold on to what you wanted but being led into new things. These things are ephemeral. So once you get to the painting, that's where we start; this is going to finish somewhere else.

They're related [drawing and painting] but you know drawing's got a whole thing of its own. My drawings are working drawings, of course, but drawing is a whole art form. George [Haynes] has done it.

George's charcoals are just unbelievable. I can't do that, but I can do it with paint if I want!

Audience Two: What started you on the road to abstraction?

Trevor Vickers: As a boy my hobby was painting and it was pretty much like all amateur painters, you want to paint a tree out the back or whatever. As I became more and more interested in painting, and in fact as I began to look at a lot of painting, I realized that so many people had worked before me and done wondrous things. Some works you thought, Why did they do it? And others you thought, well, that's just terrific. It's a work in progress. It's like the first time you read a book, usually a pretty simple book, before you get to Thomas Mann, et cetera.

It's just a building process, really. You've got to keep working, and the great thing about the fine arts is they don't stop. No matter how much technical stuff you've acquired, how much you've looked at things, et cetera, there's still more. And colour and form are both so nuanced, the slightest change can have a big effect, and that's not counting the interaction between things.

I love the fact that I can walk into a room, well, today, I came across a couple of things that, one, I hadn't seen before, and two, I'm really glad that I saw again. It's an ongoing process, I think.

* An interview held on the occasion of the exhibition *Feeling abstract? Paintings from the UWA Art Collection, 1950-1990*, Lawrence Wilson Art Gallery, the University of Western Australia, 17 July – 27 November 2021. Additional text was integrated following a second interview on 21 February 2023. Transcript edited and annotated by Sally Quin.

1. *The Field* exhibition was held at the National Gallery of Victoria (NGV), 21 August – 28 September 1968, and was curated by Brian Finemore and John Stringer.
2. This issue is discussed in Beckett Rozentals, 'The Legacy of The Field', in *The Field Revisited*, Melbourne, National Gallery of Victoria, 2018, p. 23, and Charles Green, 'Notes on the Centre: *Two Decades of American Painting in Australia, 1967*', *Tate Papers*, no. 32, Autumn 2019, <https://www.tate.org.uk/research/tate-papers/32/two-decades-american-painting>, accessed 15 February 2023. On Vickers and *The Field* see Alex Selenitsch, 'Untitled', in Trevor Vickers, *Untitled Painting*, Perth, Art Collective WA, 2016, pp. 35-36.
3. Vickers is referring to the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), New York, travelling exhibition *Two Decades of American Painting*, shown at the NGV Melbourne and AGNSW Sydney in 1967.
4. Vickers is referring to *The Field Revisited*, Ian Potter Centre: NGV Fed Square, 27 April – 26 August 2018.