

# Moments of truth

Sheridan Palmer

ARTISTS IN CONVERSATION

by Janet Hawley

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A conversation is an interactive exchange usually of a spontaneous nature. Janet Hawley's essays are a mix of journalistic intention, conversational ruminations, observations, enquiries, and a gentle goading of her subjects about the 'twin crucibles' of creativity – the personality of the artist and what occurs in his or her sanctum, the studio. Assuming the role of confessional nursemaid and curious witness, Hawley profiles more than thirty successful artists, grand old men and women of the art world, explorers of real and psychological terrains, and deceased enfants terribles. These 'conversations' make unexpectedly compelling reading.

The selection is biased towards Sydney artists, though Hawley begins with an interview conducted in 2011 with Françoise Gilot, Picasso's mistress and muse. A feisty, self-assured, intelligent woman, Gilot's paradox was her assertion of autonomy, even when she was 'defined by Picasso'. It is a story about retribution and victory. If the cult of genius begins with the Picasso legend, Hawley follows this with her beloved John Olsen, the painter whose pantheistic vision, gleeful odes, and appetite for sensual pleasures and aesthetic sites transform the narrative into a kind of bouillabaisse-like soup of life – even the continent is a platter.

From lyrical bounties to 'the stillness of a Chinese jar', Hawley presents the master of composure, the expatriate Australian painter Jeffrey Smart, whose hyper-realist cityscapes and industrialised arterial passages are stage sets in which a seagull or a figure acts as a foil to the picture's geometry. Smart confesses that there is no ground for over-intellectualising his work. Rather,

his rational process is simple: this goes with that, a shape instinctually requires another shape, colour controls colour. For him art is not agony.

Notable people often talk frankly about their lives and careers. The desire to correct facts and reveal new information is imperative before they die, lest someone else gets it wrong. It is also a way of controlling their posthumous reputation and identity. When Donald Friend's diaries became publicly available, intimate details were revealed about Margaret Olley, and it was then that she decided to document her own history. Freedom of speech in old age can be liberating. It is a relief then to have an essay on a younger artist and an excursion away from the indulgences of the artistic self. Ben Quilty was appointed an official war artist in 2011 and sent to Afghanistan's arena of fear and death, and this interview provides a powerful sense of the continuing theatre of war. It links well to the following 'conversation' with Nora Heysen, Australia's first female war artist.

Much has been written about many of the artists that Hawley selects, but she nevertheless extracts some marvelous snippets, such as Brett Whiteley's admiration of Francis Bacon as 'a man of burning intelligence, the mystery in flesh, how to capitalize upon a mistake, how to order an accident'. But the magisterial moment is Whiteley's letter to the dying Lloyd Rees, which captures the profound thrill and mystery of art. Similarly, Rosalie Gascoigne's ethos that 'simplicity comes from profundity' exemplifies both the woman and her art.

William Robinson's self-deprecating wit and parody precede the irony and reasoned pessimism of John Brack. Their paintings are barometers concerning modern society. Shocked by the 'grotesque' excesses of twentieth-century consumerism, Brack believed in artistic integrity, exactitude, and control in regulating his work on the market. It was perhaps fortunate that the artist was dead by the time his painting *The Bar* (1954) fetched \$3.12 million.

Hawley's portrait of the 'Regency Rake', as Robert Hughes dubbed Donald Friend, is a study of pathos. A peripatetic explorer of exotic places, Friend

was regaled as a great and benevolent man when he lived in foreign lands, but he died a bitter old artist in Sydney, his artistic reputation tainted by his decadence. Philistine puritanism is a dangerous disservice at any time, more so to the artist, as was evident in the recent persecution of Bill Henson over his photography, but, as Henson philosophically states, 'all great art is remarkable for its ability to contain opposing forces'.

When private lives become public record, the possibility of misrepresentation is ever present. In allowing intimate revelations to be published, artists become their own arbiter or enemy. The onus is therefore on the author to protect and not to be seduced into hagiography; Hawley manages to avoid this. In her meeting with Adam Cullen, she receives a raw slice of his disturbing self-analysis. Cullen's tragic commedia dell'arte shocks and his compassion for the misfits of society is agonising. Nevertheless, his 'conversation' carries a parodic truth about 'humanity in all its ugliness', which we in our cloistered comfort usually choose to ignore.

If art becomes a spectator sport, it can also eternally haunt. William Dobell's 1943 Archibald portrait of Joshua Smith caused both the sitter and artist to retreat into seclusion. Hawley's extraordinary interview with Smith is moving; as Smith laments, 'Dobell won the prize and I became the sacrifice.'

There are vivisections of artists by wives, daughters, and friends; mega-rich Chinese superstar artists, poets of the Cultural Revolution, who are 'Watching memory disappear'. As a trusted and empathetic recorder, Hawley's 'conversations' are welcome memory transfusions, but to bookend these with John Olsen privileges the aged painter. Concluding with a new-generation artist might have been preferable to Olsen's metaphysical musings on the immanence of death. ■

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