

THE ART DEALERS II: KYM BONYTHON

Interviewed by JOSEPH SZABO

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- S) *I think that there's a difference between an entrepreneur and a connoisseur.. "Entrepreneur" you perhaps could apply to music, in your case for instance.*
- B) I wouldn't, in my case.
- S) *But then when I was talking to **Max Hutchinson**, he calls himself an entrepreneur.*
- B) No, an entrepreneur I put in the same category as a merchant, an entrepreneur is someone who is catering to the public, I'm catering to the public with my jazz concerts, knowing them to be for a minority percentage of the population as a whole.
- S) *Therefore your reply on this is that you regard yourself as a connoisseur.*
- B) A connoisseur, yes and an educator, because I feel that what I'm doing, even if it's meeting with a resistance, is gradually breaking down that resistance by exposure so therefore that must be considered to be an educational function.
- S) *Fair enough, and you are definitely against the word 'merchant'?*
- B) I am, yes, because I think that's giving the public what they want although you know it's not good.
- S) *What's most important to you, the public, the artist or art?*
- B) That's difficult to answer, I suppose broadly speaking art because the artist is art; one of the reasons I've left Adelaide, as far as the gallery is concerned, is that what I've believed in and what Adelaide will accept are growing increasingly far apart, therefore, rather than compromise and become a merchant, and give Adelaide what I know it wants, I'd rather concentrate on other activities where I feel my actions are more fruitful. Art, I believe the most important, but artists are part of art, therefore if I can help art then I'm helping the artists whom I believe are producing that art.
- S) *Can you influence your buyer's perception in matters of art?*
- B) The attitude I've always taken, rightly or wrongly, is to try to influence the buyers to like what I like. I've always, again, rightly or wrongly, deliberately avoided an attitude of trying to sell the picture for the sake of selling it. I sell the picture because I believe in it, and therefore I do not want to influence the buyer's decision. I want to tell him that I believe in a certain thing and I hope that he can be made to believe in it too, but I wouldn't want to tell him.

- S) *You wouldn't want to influence him?*
- B) Not influence him to the extent where I'm definitely talking him into something that he doesn't believe in. I try to put it across. "In the past I've managed to recognise talent in some cases before a lot of other people and hopefully that ability has not deserted me . Now if you want my advice, I have faith in this man's future just the same as I had faith in those earlier artists' future, when I bought them and nobody else did".
- S) *Now what do you mean by future – his artistic output or his financial future ?*
- B) Well, I suppose his national or international acceptance as being . .
- S) *Or do you mean a combination of the lot?*
- B) The fact that he's gone ahead progressively. Let's take **Arthur Boyd**. I think one could look at **Arthur Boyd**'s paintings as a boy of 16 and see that he had potential and I think that ever since that period one could look at **Arthur Boyd**'s work and see that he still had that ability, that was consolidating as the years went on. Now I believe that I could see that potential many years ago and I hope that I can see the same potential in a number of younger artists that I've been exhibiting in the last 10 years. I liked them when they were first producing their work and I have faith in what they have done since, and I have faith that they will continue to produce good work – maybe better work and will ultimately achieve the recognition which I believe they deserve.
- S) *Are you taking **Boyd** as an example of what you are saying?*
- B) No, that's an example because I feel the same way about **Bob Boynes**. I gave **Bob Boynes** his first exhibition when he was an art student, at the **South Australian School of Art** and although what he's producing now is quite different from what he was producing 10 years ago I think the talent was obvious then, it's equally obvious now. And if people come to me and say is **Boynes** an artist worth buying I say, yes, because I have had faith in what he's done progressively. The same as when I go into an artist's studio for the first time. I'm very concerned if I see half a dozen different styles, you know, I like to see a uniformity in an artist's work, not only in what he's doing at the moment, but in what he was doing 3 or 4 years ago. So that I would like to influence the buyer on the basis of my knowledge of this artist over a period and if I can't persuade the potential buyer that this is a good basis for purchase then I'm not prepared to try and brow beat him into buying the work without it.
- S) *Now here is a sticky question that nobody likes. What's your qualification as a dealer?*
- B) I can answer the question best by telling you how I got into it. I started out collecting right after the war. So in other words, by the time I first owned a gallery I had been a collector for 13 or 14 years.
- S) *A private collector?*

B) A private collector, yes. Now in the 50's it was pointed out to me that it had been a long time since the last *Ure Smith* book on art. It was suggested that someone ought to do something about it so I thought well, I'll have a go at it. So in the process of gathering material for a book, many artists said to me, why don't you open a gallery in Adelaide because there's nobody there who has any sympathy for our work. Now that's how I became a dealer. Now as for my qualifications for being a dealer all I can say is that in those days – We're talking about the time when I first thought about opening the gallery in the late fifties. I had the enthusiasm as a previous supporter of the arts, I don't want to get it wrong, but I apparently had some eye for picking out of the studio a major painting compared with a lesser painting and finally I had the virtual request from artists to handle their work. To me this was my qualification, as a dealer; my enthusiasm, my eye and a knowledge that there was a need for someone to promote the sort of work that I believed in.

S) *But you also must have rather developed in your own taste as you went on.*

B) Oh definitely, the very fact that I now virtually have none of my original **Nolans** and **Drysdale's** and things like that, because I've sold them to do what I've done here, and whilst I was regretful of disposing of these early purchases, for personal and economic reasons, nevertheless I felt that I was just as happy to replace the spaces on the walls with young unknown artists in whom I believed equally as much as I had in those people fifteen years before,

S) *But would you also say that as your tastes matured or developed you found yourself evolving into a different taste from what you had in the beginning?*

B) Not altogether. I have always considered, like in music, that my tastes are fairly wide ranging and I enjoy a painting that I bought in 1950, just as much as one that I bought in 1970 so that although my own tastes have changed, I don't say that they've changed to the exclusion of my earlier tastes. I just say that they've broadened and if my gallery had any merit it was that I recognised good painting in whatever field it was, whether it was contemporary painting of the very day or painting of the time when I first started collecting. In other words I've not tried to restrict myself, I don't want to use names, but I suppose the **Central Gallery** might have survived longer than it did, if it hadn't been committed to such a narrow field. All power to them, they had their particular belief and it was narrow, Now I've got my particular belief and it's wide.

I don't feel that because I profess to like **Nolan's** and **Boyd's** that that means I can like **Boynes'** or **Reinhart's** or **Coburn's** any the less, in that I can like classical music just as I can like jazz, Some people restrict their field of enjoyment because they can only see a certain narrow pattern and this doesn't occur to me. I feel grateful that I can appreciate a wide variety and one to the least detriment to the artists.

S) *But to this, some could reply, for instance in my case, in appreciating music, that I have never developed a taste in jazz because I have found that classical music in itself, is so wide that I would need several lives to get through all that.*

*Therefore, I simply never had time for jazz. Now this can be the other side of the coin, which applies to the question of specialisation, **Central Street** for example. Those people have committed themselves to a certain formula of public education and they have followed it through which in my idea is – it's not an accomplishment, since they broke up, but it's certainly integrity.*

- B)** That's right, yes, dedication, quite.. But I don't feel that I'm in any way less dedicated or in any way lowering my standards because I happen to like a wider field, not necessarily to the exclusion of others.
- S)** *Fair enough, if one is versatile like you are then that's the case, obviously, Would you deal with conceptual art if it was a saleable artifact?*
- B)** Well, I suppose it's like, a few years ago I found myself to be the conservative member of an art judging panel and that was rather a rude shock. I suppose it was an indication that I was growing older and to a degree my appreciation had reached a point. I must admit that I am not a great believer in conceptual art and I don't think that I would exhibit conceptual art, even if it was an economic proposition because I, frankly, find I have little sympathy with it.
- S)** *Are you concerned with the present day taxation system now, since it was changed.*
- B)** Well, it's changed but I've learnt to my horror, not as much as I hoped it had changed. For instance, I believe that it doesn't encompass ceramics. Now ceramics are still subject to sales tax and duty and I'm sorry about this because I thought that when the sales tax came off works of art, it was all works of art. Naturally I'm delighted. I've written to the various ministers regularly urging this, it's been one of my hobby horses for many years, I think it's a pity then that the whole field of art isn't covered. The other thing I feel would be of a great assistance to art, perhaps not for the right motives, but for the ultimate result, is that in America they have certain tax concessions revolving around the purchase of works of art for ultimate donation to public collections; these are not available here in Australia, at least not to the same degree. Now, I went to a house in Washington some years ago, belonging to one of the trustees of the **Corcoran Gallery** and he literally had **Renoirs** and **Max Ernsts** and **Picassos** and things like that stacked face to face underneath his grand piano and he was in the process of building himself a magnificent mansion which I think cost something like two and a half million dollars, and all these paintings which he had no room for in his house are now displayed to great advantage in this house. On his death, the whole house and the contents become a public gallery. He has the pleasure of living in that house and enjoying the objects during his lifetime and possibly if the house cost two and a half million dollars to build in hard cash, it might really cost him a few hundred thousand dollars, which obviously he could afford. But I don't think there's that sort of tax encouragement in Australia, for individuals and private businesses, which has meant so much to the formation of big collections that is a feature of the American scene.

I recognise the fact that people are only doing it for a tax dodge but for whatever

purpose they're doing it. I don't think there is enough encouragement under our present taxation system to persuade private individuals and firms what could be done which would reflect not only our national heritage but on the living and saleability of the living artists' work in the country.

- S) *Do you think that pottery is regarded more as a utilitarian commodity than art, therefore . . .*
- B) In some senses it is, but I had a scene with the tax department about 18 months ago when I brought out some **Vasareleys**, that were made of plastic and plastic was a word that didn't appear in the terminology of the customs department. You know the thing was so outdated that anything, unless it was made of stone or steel or something, they didn't consider it sculpture. Plastic had been invented since and since it wasn't nominated it went into the category of kitchen utensils. I think there are a lot of things now which we believe to be works of art which are made with new materials and even with old materials like ceramics, I think there are many artists working in ceramics who are just as much to be called artists as anyone else.
- S) *But the taxation department regards pottery as more a utilitarian goods than art.?*
- B) I think mass produced pottery is a different thing from individually hand produced unique works and I think this is difficult to get the differentiation across to a government department, but at the moment you know it's either black or white. If it's a vase then therefore it's subject not only to sales tax, but duty too. Whether it's a vase that's used for holding flowers, or a vase that sits in a glass cabinet and would never be used for utilitarian purposes, there is no differentiation and I think there should be some.
- S) *How do you rate Australian art in general to overseas art?*
- B) I think the best thing that has happened to Australian art has been the removal of the sales tax. I think that this sales tax has made Australian art too much of a closed shop for too long. It's discouraged the private dealers from exhibiting overseas art and the Australian public from comparing Australian art with overseas art. There are a number of highly regarded Australian artists who have been getting away with murder for too long because the public has had no opportunity of comparing how much you can buy a recognised international artist for and how much you pay for someone who is known only within Australia. Therefore I think Australian art should be prepared to stand comparison with international art and I admit that a lot of Australian art does not stand the comparison. I think that the sooner the public has this opportunity the better it'll be, not only for Australian art but also the buyers, because they won't be paying unrealistic sums of money for mediocre artists. I don't agree with **Hughes** that Australian art is not to be regarded at all.
- S) *But then you can't take **Hughes** as . . .*

- B)** That's right, he was always a stirrer and that's his business. I think there are possibly, considering our population, a very favourable percentage of our artists that would compare on an international scale. But it's like **Helpman** saying on the radio he doesn't imagine **Nureyev** as sitting at home in London or wherever it is, counting the days before he appears at the Adelaide Festival of Arts. It's purely relative. I think that we have some good artists here and I don't think that we need be anything other than proud of them. My opinion is like my feeling about Aboriginal art and people who paint with brushes in their mouths, one can admire them but when you get down to evaluating a work of art, it's got to be purely and simply on what's there, not, was he an aboriginal or did he paint with the brush up his arse, it's got to come down to the fact – is it a good work of art? And the sooner Australian art can be compared with international art the better. Galleries are now encouraged to let people judge for themselves. I'm very pleased that it's happened and I think that it can only be good.
- S)** *But would you say the best of Australian art can hold its own on the international scene?*
- B)** Yes. Not many, but in fact there are some artists in Australia that are not appreciated in Australia and who have got much more hope of being appreciated overseas.
- S)** *Do you think certain reforms are necessary in general within art itself, in order to communicate better to the public?*
- B)** No. I think a certain amount of it is bound up with that previous question. In a general sense I think that a lot of Australian art is overpriced. My experience is that one can buy the work of an unknown English or European painter for cheaper than one can buy a comparable work in Australia. I mean the average young Australian artist having his first one-man exhibition seems to be much more inclined to ask a higher price than his counterpart overseas.
- S)** *But here I refer to art itself. Do you think that art in Australia requires alternation within its philosophy, or attitude?*
- B)** In what way?
- S)** *Well, Schools of Art are obviously tied up with philosophical attitudes and because a philosophical attitude isolates itself from the public, the public cannot understand it, and the public blames the dealers, because the dealers are unable to bridge the gap; or they blame it on the artists and say they can do anything they like and still nobody would understand them. I know it's a bit of a hard question but do you think that artists themselves should change their philosophy in order to come closer to public understanding?*
- B)** No. I think any artist must do what he believes in and I don't think that he should be influenced by appealing to the public. The artist that I have most sympathy for is the one who goes ahead in spite of everything and sticks to his guns. The classic example is perhaps **Ken Reinhardt** who for years has produced the sort of thing he believes in and he doesn't stint in anyway on the presentation of it. In

other words he doesn't spray his frames with gold paint, he uses aluminium, he knows that the public has, in the past, been fairly indifferent to his work and yet he's not prepared to compromise by using cheaper materials. He has a certain finished item in mind and no expense will be spared to produce it. I would hate an artist to feel that he had to change his ideals to better fall in with what is accepted.

A lot of people ask me whether the Adelaide Festival has any benefit and it's true that during the Adelaide Festival, in my gallery days there, you couldn't move in that gallery, not just for one day but for two or three weeks and after the thing was over 98% of those people wouldn't come near a gallery again until the next festival. But there were those 2% that, having come, would see something they'd like and twenty festivals from now that 2% will be a lot of people. Therefore, my attitude is that even if you just make a slight dent, if you keep on long enough, that's the whole thing – I reckon that the bus drivers in Budapest probably know more about what's going on in the town hall than the bus drivers of Paddington and I think only time will change that but it will change. Twenty years from now the general public are going to be more aware of things that we call culture than they are now and that's just because gradual inroads are being made – people are becoming more aware of things that in the past were perhaps considered effete. My classic case was in PIX magazine some years ago. They had a quiz where you had to decide whether you had masculine or feminine characteristics and one of the questions was "have you been in an art gallery in the last six months". And if you said, yes, that means you have "feminine characteristics". The idea of someone going to the gallery, – you know, you're a bit of a bloody poofah. I think that's got to change, and it will change, the same as that other thing about the littering of the streets, Australians are absolutely abominable the way they just throw their cigarette packets out, or pull the car up on the edge of the road and empty the rubbish out on the side. If you start on kids from the time they start to go to school that that sort of thing is not allowed, maybe you won't see a difference in four years, but in twenty years, I can even foresee the day when Victoria Street, Paddington won't be the dirtiest street in Australia.

- S)** *What's your favourite art form?*
- B)** I wouldn't say I had one, as I said before I pride myself in that I can get as much enjoyment out of a piece of sculpture or a painting or a print, I wouldn't say I had a favourite.
- S)** *But, if it would come down to the crux of the thing you would have to choose.*
- B)** You mean would I choose music or art? I don't think I could live without either.
- S)** *That's a good answer. If you couldn't continue as an art dealer what else would you do?*
- B)** What I'm doing now, concert promotion, speedway and, hopefully, in the background still trying to convert people into what I believe is art even if I wasn't particularly involved in the personal selling of it. In other words, I'm

increasingly involved in government committee activities in the arts in general, which certainly take up a lot of time and remuneratively means nothing. But I do it because I think that I can offer some insight or contribution towards assisting the things I believe in. Art is the one area where the **Council for the Arts** doesn't operate. The **Commonwealth Art Advisory Board** does all the art business, so therefore, although I'm on the **Council for the Arts**, art is not covered by that. But it does have influence in other ways, which is overall going towards that gradual infiltration into public consciousness which is, I believe, so important to the future of the whole life of Australia. I feel that what I'm doing in that field is perhaps in a way more important than what I'm doing in the art gallery, because it covers a wider field, it gets to more people.

- S) *It's involved more in human interest, in the field of sociology.*
- B) Yes, and at one stage, because of my self-doubt that I was contributing enough I considered resigning. And someone said don't resign, it's good to feel there's someone there who feels he doesn't know everything.

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