

Patrick McCaughey: In Defense

IN DEFENSE - PATRICK McCAUGHEY

The Power Institute of Fine Arts represents the richest endowment ever made to the fine arts in Australia. It has become the most controversial.

Next week the bulk of the Power collection, consisting solely of recent overseas art acquired over the past five years at a cost of nearly \$100,000, goes on view at the National Gallery of Victoria.

When Dr. John Wardell Power bequeathed \$2.5 million to the University of Sydney to set up a faculty of fine arts, his prime purpose was to 'make available to the people of Australia the latest ideas and theories in the plastic arts by means of lectures, and teaching and by the purchase of the most recent contemporary art of the world'.

Such munificence allied to such liberal high hopes naturally attracted controversy. Ten years have passed since the university received the bequest and it is now embarking on an ambitious fund-raising campaign to set up the Power Foundation for the Fine Arts.

Having started with \$2.5 million why does the Power Institute need more money?

The foundation's prospectus points out that the bequest 'consists mainly of equity stocks and the annual income is relatively modest' - averaging some \$75,000 a year. Out of that the salaries of the Power Professor of Contemporary Art, Bernard Smith, the Curator of the Power Gallery, Elwyn Lynn, and the librarian, Anthony Bradley, have to be met: \$9,000 a year goes on books for the institute's library and \$18,000 a year for new acquisitions.

And so the bequest melts away. The university pays for the teaching function of the institute. But basically there is not enough income to achieve the aims of the will, or more acutely, to meet the expectations so many have for the Power Institute.

Attacks on the Power Institute have come in waves.

One wave was home-grown. Spearheaded, if such is the appropriate metaphor for rusty sabre-rattling, by Laurie Thomas, Wallace Thornton, then art critic for the Sydney Morning Herald and the painter, John Olsen, they assaulted teaching the history of art as the proper study of the institute.

Such critics reflected the strong anti-intellectual bias of the Australian art world. They held to a child-like belief in art without tears, uncorrupted by knowledge and untarnished by discrimination.

Their attack was withstood. It must be gratifying to them, however, that years later one of the prime functions of the new foundation will be to collect Australian art to complement the Power Collection of overseas art.

The third wave of kamikazes is within the gates. Recently Dr. Donald Brook, who doubles as senior lecturer in the Power Institute and art critic for the Sydney Morning Herald, has publicly voiced his 'disappointment' with the teaching of the institute and 'deep misgivings' over the collection. He has roundly condemned both the Power Professor and the Power Curator as 'aloof' and found their present execution of duties 'unscholarly' and 'egotistical'. Stern stuff to be sure.

What lies behind this controversy is a fascinating conflict of ideology and personality. Dr. Brook is no art historian. His training and bent is technological, scientific and philosophical; more interested in theories of art than works of art, he is inexperienced in the art game, a fervent, even gullible, supporter of the new.

Bernard Smith, the ablest art historian Australia has ever produced, and Elwyn Lynn, a connoisseur critic of wide experience in the art world, are more sceptical and are ambitious for a more solid achievement. Professor Smith hopes for an institute of high intellectual and academic standards as the basis for the institute's influence and reputation. Mr. Lynn hopes for a gallery of museum quality - not a laboratory of art effects.

Dr. Brook objects to the Power Institute basing its courses on western European art rather than concentrating on the art of this region. In this he is an odd mixture of logic chopping naivete. He describes western art as 'one rather inaccessible regional manifestation of art' in which the 'University of Sydney can never hope to excell'.

He believes that if the art of the region were taken as the prime study, the Power Institute could be internationally tops 'in a decade or two' ... oh yeah?

The question of teaching Asian art is certainly a vexatious one. Nobody is doing it and it clearly must be done. From the outset the Power Institute has wanted to include Asian art in its curriculum and collection. Finding scholars to come and teach it, is one major problem, and the dearth of collections, except in Melbourne, is another. No doubt the new Power Foundation will make Asian art one of its babies. It is certainly a foundling at present.

However diverting it may be to watch a senior lecturer publicly and plaintively attacking his colleagues for something approaching dereliction of duties, there are more serious questions arising out of the present toils.

A good case has been made for public financial support of the Power Institute. There is no mistaking the vision of Bernard Smith. But one wonders if public support will really be forthcoming until the Power Institute exists as a physical reality, replete with its own gallery.

After 10 years and upwards of \$750,000 expenditure, might we not reasonably expect something else than cough up more dough?

