The art of seeing – through the eyes of Clarice Beckett

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The Covid19 pandemic has had diverse impacts that still unfold before us, eighteen months after its ravages became an established world-wide fact. Under the privileged (Australian) conditions of restricted movement within the confines of homes provided with water and electricity, not to mention access to others through the internet, we have learnt to live with a keener sense of awareness and possibly even, mindfulness. Some of us may even have developed the art of *listening* and actually *hearing* those within our ambit. As the pall of nationwide lockdowns lifts from our nation, it seems extraordinarily fortuitous that the Art Gallery of South Australia (AGSA) has opened an exhibition of the works of Clarice Beckett that invites us to refine the art of *seeing.* And not only seeing, but doing so in a context of inner stillness and wonderment at the innate beauty of the present moment captured in the simple, the mundane, the very ordinary. The exhibition is appositely named **Clarice Beckett: The Present Moment**, and is curated by AGSA's Tracey Lock whose splendid accompanying catalogue *The Present Moment: The art of Clarice Beckett* seduces the reader with verve and clarity into the life and works of this intriguing and much under-recognised painter, effectively an important pioneer of modern Australian art in the 1920s and 30s. The cover of the catalogue presents as a real-size framed reproduction of Beckett's painting *Luna Park* (1919) – a masterly touch promising to inveigle even those who may not be able to sight the exhibition before it closes in mid-May.

Biography

Clarice Beckett was born in Casterton, Victoria on 21 March 1887 into a well-to-do middle-class family. Her father Joseph Beckett (1850-1936) was a banker and the family including Clarice and her younger sister Hilda (1891-1980), moved between Melbourne, Ballarat, Bendigo and back, following his various appointments. An

older brother Thomas Beckett (1882-1899) was born with microcephaly and died as a teenager. It was in Ballarat, as a pupil at Queen's College that Clarice developed her interest in spiritualism and subscribed to *The Harbinger of Light*, Australia's first spiritualist magazine. At this time her favourite reading included Darwin's *On the origin of species* and HPB's *The Voice of Silence.* During a brief return to Melbourne between 1904 and 1906, Clarice completed her secondary education where she emerged as a talented student with artistic ability. She attended a theosophical lecture at the Princess Theatre and joined the artist circle of Beatrix and Alexander Colquhoun, themselves practising theosophists and spiritualists. In 1908, Annie Besant, then President of the Theosophical Society, toured Australia a second time and included Melbourne in her itinerary. The major theme was 'Nature's finer forces' and topics included astral sight, anti-psychic bodies and spiritualist phenomena (Lock, 2020:168). Though Beckett never joined the Theosophical Society there is little doubt that she was receptive to some key theosophical ideas that later found expression in her art, as for example, the recognition of the underlying unity of all things, the importance of centring oneself in the present moment, of practising mindfulness and embracing an immanent spiritual reality beyond that which is visible to the physical eye.

The outbreak of WW1 appears not to have touched the Beckett family. Clarice and her younger sister Hilda lived in temporary accommodation in Melbourne and between 1914-16 Clarice took drawing lessons from Fred McCubbin at the National Gallery School. A year later, aged 29, she decided to study for nine months under the controversial artist and theorist, Max Meldrum (1875-1955) commuting twice a week from the family home in Bendigo to attend classes in Elizabeth Street, Melbourne. Meldrum was an important mentor for the budding artist, recognising her talents and remaining a sounding board and critic of her work for many years. In essence Meldrum guided Beckett to develop an intuitive connection with her **subject and to express** that connection on canvas directly, simply and minimally. There were to be no sketches, no outlines, and no

drafts. Thinned paint was applied swiftly with flat brushwork and never reworked. The focus was on reproducing the subtle relationship between shape, colour and composition with priority on capturing the tonal effect of the scene.

By 1918 Beckett affirmed her independence from Meldrum although she still valued his appraisal of her work. She painted mostly outdoors, lured by the tones and ineffable quality of diffuse light especially at dawn, at dusk, on misty days and in heavy fog. She constructed a painting trolley that she would drag along to favourite venues round the bayside suburb of Beaumaris to which the family moved in 1919 and where she would be based for the rest of her creative life. Other favourite areas included the Mornington Peninsula, Westernport Bay, Geelong, Ballarat and Lorne. An important interlude was six months spent in 1926 in Naringal on a sheep station in Victoria's western district owned by the brother of her friend Maud Rowe. For the first time Beckett had her own studio (above the shearing shed) and was able to devote herself uninterrupted to her painting, producing some of her more innovative and poetic work. The artist never travelled outside Victoria though this did not restrict her awareness of wider artistic and intellectual trends. Indeed, a prominent bookseller Gino Nibbi described her as the best read woman in Melbourne.

Beckett exhibited her work over sixteen years, including ten solo exhibitions between 1923 and 1933 at the Athenaeum Gallery in Melbourne. She was invited to join several group shows including the Twenty Melbourne Painters, and one of her paintings was exhibited at the first international exhibition of contemporary Australian artists at the Roerich Museum in New York in 1931. Despite these accolades, Beckett and her work were increasingly marginalised. Her perceived alignment with Max Meldrum (who had become a figure of division and derision) alienated her from the mainstream, while her persistent ethereal embrace of simple and unpretentious subjects ran counter to the dominant engagement with heroic themes and grandiose landscapes. Even so, she worked prolifically,

ever focussed on an inner dimension in recognition of which she described each painting as ‘a self-renewing act’.

In the early 1930s Clarice devoted herself to looking after her ailing mother (Elizabeth née Brown) who died in 1934. The following year on 7 July 1935 Beckett herself unexpectedly succumbed to double pneumonia and was buried at the Cheltenham cemetery. Her premature death at the age of forty-eight cut short the career of this prolific painter. Her father reputedly burnt some of the paintings in her estate though he and Clarice’s surviving younger sister Hilda (Mangan) helped organise the Clarice Beckett Memorial Exhibition at the Athenaeum Gallery in 1936. Soon after, Joseph Beckett died and Hilda was left in charge of her sister’s estate.

After her death and for the next three decades, Clarice Beckett and her work fell into total obscurity. The extraordinary sequence of events that brought the artist from obscurity to claim her proper place in the annals of Australian modern art, is recorded in a fascinating January 2021 interview by AGSA’s Tracey Lock with octogenarian art critic and Melbourne gallery owner Rosalind Humphries/Hollinrake. This videoed interview forms an integral part of AGSA’s exhibition **Clarice Beckett: The Present Moment**. Hollinrake recollects how in the late 1960s, an elderly woman walked anonymously into her gallery and unfolded several unframed small canvases that Hollinrake immediately recognised as works by Clarice Beckett. The elderly person was none other than Hilda. The chance encounter led to a subsequent and enduring fifty-year commitment by Hollinrake to bring Beckett’s work back into the mainstream of Australian modern art. Specifically, she sought to validate Clarice Beckett as one of Australia’s leading female artists.

Back in the sixties, Hollinrake was invited to Hilda Magan’s rural property near Benalla where she was taken to an open-sided hay shed where about two thousand canvases, barely covered with hessian sacks, were stacked higgledy-piggledy, open to the elements, vermin and wildlife. In the salvage operation that followed Hollinrake was able to save, restore and/or frame some 369 paintings. These

formed the basis of the Clarice Beckett retrospective at the Rosalind Humphries Galleries in Melbourne in November 1971. Although several exhibitions of Beckett's work ensued in subsequent decades, the current AGSA exhibition featuring some 139 works is the first major retrospective since the 1970s. Most importantly, Hollinrake has identified the Art Gallery of South Australia as the future beneficiary and repository of the works of Clarice Beckett that she currently holds in trust.

The AGSA 2021 Clarice Beckett exhibition

All exhibitions reflect the perception and sensitivity of their curator, and this retrospective is no exception. Viewers of course, involuntarily and necessarily add their own unique perception and reaction to the totality of the experience, beyond the impact of individual paintings. It is a unique and enriching immersion where the act of *seeing* adds up to more than the sum or imprint of the individual works on display. It is a wondrous experience, akin to a walking meditation. This effect is enhanced by Tracey Lock's decision to present Beckett's work as though one were following the artist in her solitary artistic communion with nature, starting at dawn and then moving from gallery to gallery throughout the course of one day, until the exhibition ends at dusk and nightfall. The paintings are thus clustered not by date (Beckett rarely dated or even signed her paintings) but by time of day, no matter that the subjects reflect different localities, vagaries of weather or foci of interest. Lock's second masterly ploy is to seduce the viewer by leading one from room to room through portals: arches, narrow passages giving entry into larger spaces, and small framed apertures within walls that invite the viewer to peep into another space, or a single painting on a distant wall. It is an unobtrusive way of stilling the pace, of training the eye to see, of focussing the mind to absorb, to meditate, to celebrate.

Almost counterintuitive is the viewer's sudden stepping out into a replica kitchen, furnished with functional furniture including a large table, sink and an imposing bay window that looks out onto another

exhibition space. Here Lock has hung Beckett's still-life paintings, mostly floral arrangements, and her portraits, notably of her sister Hilda. There is a huge understatement in this room that so incongruously displays Beckett's artistic prowess beyond painting *en plein air*. It is an emphatic rebuttal of Beckett's father's refusal to acquiesce to her plea that he include a studio in the new house, St.Enoch's, that he built at Beaumaris on retirement. His retort to his daughter's request was simply that "the kitchen table will do". The relative confines of the kitchen space are in marked contrast to the sweep of other galleries, some semi-circular, one offering a fully immersive circular white space on which are projected waves of muted colour reflecting Beckett's tonal palette. The final gallery featuring some of Beckett's dusk and night scenes dedicates a whole wall to a silent image of a life-size corrugated iron shed that flickers in and out of shadow. We are reminded of the fragility of art, the transience of our existence, and triumphantly, of the positive and lasting contribution of those who have cared enough to rescue and honour the silenced and forgotten.

The art of seeing

So come, come with me, passing through the transitional space of pastel shifting colours, into an alcove where a single painting silently greets us. Muted tones of grey, a blush of rose and wash of green suggest daybreak along an indistinct roadway from which emerges a single, solitary, shadowy grey figure. *Silent Approach* (c. 1924) sets the tone for Beckett's numerous paintings at this hallowed time of day. Other daybreak scenes (named by her sister Hilda, as were all of Beckett's paintings) like *Tranquility*, *Solitude*, *The First Sound* or *First Light*, entice the viewer into a suspended state of being and seeing. As Lock puts it in the general signage of the exhibition, it is as though the paint 'had been "sighed" onto the board, generating an illusion of a breathing atmospheric moment.'

In his all too brief review of this exhibition, art critic *The Australian*'s Christopher Allen explains why Beckett's early morning paintings are so effective:

> What she evidently loved about this time of day was not simply the low light and mist which soften forms and reduce tonal range, but more precisely the gradual reappearance of ambient and radiant light in the period just before the rise of the sun…and it is this mysterious, transitional moment when colour saturation and tone are still faint, that particularly appeals to her sensitivity (Allen, 2021, p.11).

Yet as we move through subsequent galleries featuring daylight scenes whether in the rain or sunshine, at the beach, depicting boatsheds, street scenes, storms or summer fields, there is no mistaking Beckett's pervading and consistent sense of stillness and depth through understatement. So also her sunset and evening paintings which draw us into the mysterious if not the mystical, by replacing as Allen puts it 'the hope of dawn with the melancholy of twilight' (ibid).

Back in 1936 *The Age*'s art critic had laconically observed that Beckett's paintings were something to be seen and felt, rather than written about. Amen to that. So also Christopher Allen who describes her work as 'the visual equivalent of meditation…in which wilful looking is suspended in order to discover the disinterested clarity of pure seeing'. I return to the exhibition again, and again, each encounter richer and more internally soothing than the last. It is a salutary reminder of the unity of all things: as above, so below – pandemic notwithstanding.

References

Allen, Christopher, Jewels in the mist, *The Weekend Australian Review*, March 27-28, 2021.

Lock, Tracey, *The present moment: The art of Clarice Beckett*, Art Gallery of South Australia, 2020.