

## *Cow up a Tree*

John Kelly is a member of that endangered species - an artist with a fine sense of humour who utilises that humour to serious purpose in his art. To European eyes *Cow up a tree* might seem absurdist or surreal. Undoubtedly it is, but the interest of the work depends on the viewer also seeing it in its Australian context - the distinctive brand of humour and the stories that have contributed to the evolution of this bloated papier-mâché form, now stranded up a gum tree and monumentalised in bronze.

Kelly's art reflects his preoccupation with the interplay, and occasional surprising interchange, of reality and non-reality, humour and seriousness. *Cow up a Tree* is the conjunction of two Australian histories – Australian floods and Dobell's cows – which contain these opposites. Floods occur frequently in Australia, usually wreaking destruction and tragedy. But they can also have absurd outcomes, such as objects ludicrously stranded in trees. The episode of the artist Dobell – later Sir William – being engaged to make camouflage cows in a futile exercise to deceive enemy pilots during the Second World War, contains a wealth of absurd elements, yet beneath its surface Kelly detected serious matters for research. Central to the story was the issue of camouflage, the function of which is to conceal reality; it is non-reality masquerading as reality. Also camouflage has historical and formal connections with twentieth-century art. During the First World War Picasso famously said to Gertrude Stein, noting the fragmented abstraction of the camouflaged tanks they watched roll through the streets of Paris, 'It is we who have made that'. He was referring to the Cubists.

An intriguing aspect of the obscure camouflage episode in Dobell's life was its uncanny connection with an infamous one, one that contains equal proportions of tragedy and farce and remains to this day the most notorious *cause celebre* in Australian art. It was probable that during their twelve months at the airfield Dobell had made the preliminary sketches for his portrait of fellow camouflagist, Joshua Smith, which, when it won the 1944 Archibald Prize<sup>1</sup>, sparked an acrimonious court battle. Ironically, at issue in the case was art's relation to reality, the prosecution arguing that the depiction of Smith, with abnormally long spindly neck and small head, was a caricature, not a work of art. (Again ironically, Joshua Smith actually did look like this.) A litany of sophistic arguments was presented by both sides at the trial: what was and was not permissible in art, what was and was not art<sup>2</sup>. Kelly has for some time been exploring the notion of sophistry – false arguments that masquerade as reasoned truths in support of a case. Sophistry, which bears the same relation to truth as camouflage does to reality is, interestingly, no longer a word in popular usage, perhaps because it has been superseded by terms such as

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<sup>1</sup> The Archibald Prize, mounted in Sydney at the Art Gallery of New South Wales, has, since 1919, been Australia's most prestigious award for portraiture.

<sup>2</sup> Although Dobell won the case he never fully recovered from the horror of his work, and his friend, Joshua Smith, being subjects of a ludicrous public debate.

'critical debate'. Dobell's period as a camouflagist was thus brimful with hidden connections, incipient narrative, metaphorical potential, and irony piled on irony – elements which Kelly elucidated, layered and compacted in his several series of paintings and sculptures inspired by the Dobell episode.

The setting of some of these paintings is the mysterious workshop of Dobell's airfield, with the camouflage cows or their unassembled parts as dumb protagonists in silent incidents charged with mysterious purpose. The block-like cow, while infinitely reproducible and portable (it is variously depicted as stacked, balanced, wheeled, carried or propped on trestles; assembled sideways, upside down or in copulating positions) is also highly adaptable, appearing as anything from a timber framework cow to a prized specimen from early colonial art. The one constant in all this is the cow's abstracted physiognomic resemblance to Joshua Smith in Dobell's portrait – long spindly neck, small head, and a certain air of wonder. In these ongoing painterly narratives the cow acquires a history and takes on its own curious reality. You read these beautifully painted works as humorous forays into the artist's inventiveness and the poignantly quizzical cows as metaphors for aspects of Australian culture and colonial history, or even enigmatic signifiers of art's shifting purposes and the puzzling scenarios in which it finds itself. Inevitably several became sculpted museum exhibits, attaining the baffling status of real fake papier-mâché cows sealed in dignified showcases.

With the imagined incident of a flood at Dobell's airfield the fake cow finds itself stuck in the awkward embrace of a national emblem scorned by the Australian art world for most of this century – the gum tree. To make 'gum tree art' was to make representational art and both were considered synonymous with a deplorable absence of serious intent – again, pure sophistry. In *Cow up a tree* – four tonnes of tactile bronze, eight metres high – the fake cow and the despised realistic gum tree find themselves incongruously transfigured into the substance and stature of serious public monuments.

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