

KEVIN ROBERTSON INTERVIEWED BY SALLY QUIN *

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Sally Quin: My first question to Kevin is, basically, why painting? The only example that we have in the exhibition that is not painting is the wonderful video, *The Death of Actaeon*, a Super-8 film that Kevin made in 1987 [with music by Kim Salmon]. But even that is like a painting, an animated painting.

Kevin Robertson: I guess it was an early fascination, just seeing paintings reproduced, and I'm talking about kitsch reproductions because growing up in Norseman there wasn't much fine art to speak of. Also, it was paint, as substance, that from a very young age fascinated me.

Sally Quin: So your initial encounter with painting was as reproductions in books?

Kevin Robertson: Yes, I think we might have had two art books in the house; one was a fine art book and that was a bit unusual, and the other I prefer not to mention! Then later on when I went to Applecross [Senior] High School, the painting teachers who would come through were just fascinating people, and I learnt a lot from watching them work. I experimented with lots of mediums, you know: tape, videotape, photography and so on, but I found that painting was more flexible for me, for the things that I wanted to do. And it's not time-based, so that's another thing. Whenever I started messing around with audio or video I realized that days had gone by and I hadn't gotten too far. I like the way, in painting, you can achieve a lot in a shorter period of time.

Sally Quin: Your work, it's realist art, but with poetic and imaginative elements. It is conceptually very rich. So in painting you found a medium that was fulfilling in terms of the ideas it could convey, as well as technically interesting.

Kevin Robertson: Exactly, it's got both those things in it, so you can have a dream, or see something, and then you can translate it into this medium. I remember at art school this quote from John Berger describing Vermeer, and he used this phrase about when you see seeds on the bread and the woman pouring the milk ...

Sally Quin: When you see ...?

Kevin Robertson: The seeds on the bread or the textures in the painting – he said I'm looking down the corridor of time. I thought, that's it, you kind of time travel when you look at an historical painting, because it's the same thing that the artist would have been looking at, and it's the same thing that lots of people have looked at over time. I find painting exciting in that light.

Sally Quin: Yes, as a direct connection to ...

Kevin Robertson: The history of art.

Sally Quin: You grew up in Norseman [a town 725 km east of Perth, Western Australia], an extraordinary place. Did being brought up there make you see the world somewhat differently?

Kevin Robertson: I think because the backyard was the bush and you had no one to watch over you, and kids would just go and build forts, dig underground tunnels, make huge catapults, and whatever, you had so much freedom as a child. I would play by myself, too, and it was like a landscape from, I imagined, another planet. Because it's semi-arid, Norseman is on the edge of the desert, it would fulfill my idea that I wasn't really on Earth. At a certain point, around the beginning of primary school, I did realise that I was on Earth! That did influence me, the freedom of it, and the way you imagine things. I also went to a Catholic school for the first three years. The nuns would be reading biblical stories and getting us to illustrate them, and to me those stories were describing the salt lakes outside, like the Dead Sea, the same thing. My imagination was just what was outside.

Sally Quin: And, of course, the imaginative or otherworldly interpretation of natural phenomena is something that is particularly evident in the meteorite paintings in the next room, where you have these expansive imaginary landscapes which are derived from looking through a magnifying glass at a small meteorite. All of these things may be derived from this childhood imagining which I think adds a very significant dimension to your realist practice.

Kevin Robertson: Yes, I think that's true. And when I went to study at art school in Sydney, someone came up to me and said, 'Are you from Ballarat?' I said 'No', and he said, 'Well, you've got this sort of geological palette'. I thought later, that actually does make sense.

Sally Quin: Yes, indeed. Moving on to art school [WAIT, later Curtin University] in the 1980s where you and your peers, including Megan [Salmon], were interested in painting. This was happening during a resurgence of painting, broadly figurative painting, internationally. It was the postmodern era and young artists were breaking free from strictures [associated with minimalism and conceptualism], looking at the world in a different way through figuration and a return to subjectivity in art. I'm really interested to know, Kevin, about those WAIT years, 1982 to 1984.

Kevin Robertson: We were surprisingly switched-on to exactly what was happening in this period in painting. John Beard arrived as a lecturer [from the UK] and he was wowing us all, talking about representation and the art scene in London, so everyone was attuned to that, basically Neo-Expressionism. We were looking at *Flash Art* magazine, for instance, people like Eric Fischl had emerged. The shock of seeing subversive, suburban images was so exciting at the time, so there was a real buzz about all that. The gallery [Art Gallery of Western Australia] were showing things that were related as well, maybe more towards the end of art school, with the purchase of *Naked Man with Rat*, a [Lucien] Freud which had a huge impact.

And there were the third years, Tom Alberts and André Lipscombe, who were very heavily into figurative art and so the drawing component came back into art school. WAIT didn't have a very good reputation from the outside – from the 70s it had dropped into a style of colour-field painting, and there was kind of a 'WAIT-y' style of painting, and so it wasn't necessarily a great place to go at the time, especially if you were interested in figuration. Then in the early 1980s when we got there, we found a really rigorous drawing program where you'd spend hours of every day just drawing from models. I felt fortunate to be there at that time.

Sally Quin: And then the group that emerged from that, a group of third-year students and some second-year students, became known as the 'Oddfellows' group.¹ They were producing paintings of people in, you know, humble suburban environments, friends and family, everyday life, with imaginative or fantastical elements sometimes included. You hadn't really seen a lot of that locally [in Perth], except for some social realist works of the 1930s, such those of Harald Vike.

Kevin Robertson: I agree with that. There was a lot of interest in those themes and a lot of discussion about it. And even though there was no internet, there was a knowledge about similar movements emerging internationally. I was talking to someone last night who was from Glasgow, and she said: 'Oh, you probably don't know anything about Glasgow', and I said, 'Yep, Glasgow Pups, Stephen Conroy'. People found out about things, exchanged information in all sorts of ways, including of course through art journals.

Sally Quin: Just in terms of the way that information was disseminated without the internet. Do you think things had a greater impact because there was less to consume?

Kevin Robertson: I think it occurs more through the imagination. I only knew a few things, say I might know the *New Spirit in Painting* [exhibition] had Francis Bacon in it.² You wouldn't have seen it in a catalogue or known much about it, so it was just ideas. There was very restricted information about it, so you had to kind of make it yourself, or imagine it, and respond to it. And, everyone would be talking about painting. I guess now there's more information, it's changed things. It doesn't make it better, as in a way it demystifies things, and you kind of move on. So learning about things in those days was interesting, intriguing.

Sally Quin: In the 1990s while there is certainly a continuity in your work, Kevin, we also note changes, particularly in terms of scale. And that's partly the result of you being in Sydney and interacting with abstract painters who were working in a very different mode. You were absorbing what they were doing and thinking about your own practice in this context, so we get a kind of paring-back in these 90s works. Can you tell us about going to Sydney in 1991 to do postgrad study at COFA [College of Fine Arts]. What was the scene like there?

Kevin Robertson: It was a bit of a shock, in that I'd had a little following in the 1980s in Perth, and there was quite a lot of support. There wasn't support for figuration, institutionally, that wouldn't happen until much, much later; but there was collegial support that made some sort of sense. [In Sydney] I became friends with painter Gino Palmieri who was kind of doing a version of Neo-Geo, you know, very hard-edge minimalist work, and we shared a studio at Bondi Junction. Every day I was fascinated by him doing these geometric drawings, and just playing with a single idea, and it would evolve. There was also his friend who'd just come back from New York, David Serisier. I went to his studio and he was doing this really big, textural abstract painting. So these encounters made me change the way I thought about figuration, and I started becoming interested in working larger, applying paint differently, staining the canvas, for example. So all those sorts of things came into it, not in any planned way, it was just ... I was affected by it and that was really interesting.

Sally Quin: These Sydney works, such as *Red Room*, *Bondi Junction* [gestures to work behind], have a clear relationship to abstract painting, and that was partly, I believe, the influence of Alan Oldfield at COFA. Oldfield had been a hard-edge, minimalist painter who had shown in *The Field* exhibition of 1968. He then developed an interest in Italian fresco painting of the fifteenth century, and began to work in a figurative manner. Importantly, he took technical knowledge related to making abstract art and applied that to his figurative practice.

Kevin Robertson: Alan was my lecturer at City Art Institute which became COFA and he was fantastic. His feedback was very specific, relating to the figure in space and so on, really intelligent and acute. He gave me a catalogue of his Julian of Norwich paintings, and they were really stunning. It did influence me, yeah. Things became a lot more carefully constructed, like the early paintings are really just 'point-and-go' type paintings, the space is there and you paint. But in *Red Room* I spent a lot of time in preparation, moving things around in the space before I started.

Sally Quin: So, a much more deliberate approach to composition?

Kevin Robertson: Completely, Alan would look at the background of your paintings and say you can't just deal with the detail of things, you've got to consider all the space around. And I think that's what I took up on.

Sally Quin: Yes, and I think *Red Room* is indicative of that. I've really gone to town on this painting in the book and given it, you may think, a quite outlandish analysis: I've seen the cream rectangular shape in the background as a blank canvas, for instance.

Kevin Robertson: Even though we know it's not!

Sally Quin: I see the mirror as being a reference to mimesis; I see the shadow, similarly, as being related to – in the Western tradition – the origins of drawing and painting. I give a reading of this work in terms of Kevin's interest in representation itself, its limits and possibilities. The works of the 90s are also considered in relation to a growing sophistication, particularly in terms of art historical references. Coming out of postmodernism, there's no shame in having this repertoire of art from the past that you adapt and change, and make your own. Do you want to talk about your interest in art history and how that shaped your art?

Kevin Robertson: Megan [Salmon] and I went to Europe for maybe 6 months [1986-1987], we just absorbed everything we could. I described the paintings I saw in a notebook in great detail. In my head when I came back [to Australia] it wasn't Fischl and Freud, it was Veronese or Titian. So, yeah, it might seem fanciful from the outside that Sally's talking about Renaissance painting, but it's totally what was going on in my head, especially when I got to Sydney. I was just obsessed with the way Titian could make a surface look interesting, you just look at it and look at it and think, 'How's he doing that?'

Sally Quin: In your work you also reinterpret art historical tropes to fit a contemporary environment. In *Rebecca and Chris*, of 1992, the bathroom painting here, it's taking up the theme of the bather that's been present in Western art history for a very, very long time, also in contemporary art. Here we have a sophisticated role reversal: in that the woman is normally depicted naked and the man is normally depicted as the intruder. So you take these references and transform them. I think another theme of your art is intimacy, from the very earliest works to those produced recently. Would you like to comment on that?

- Kevin Robertson:** These are difficult things to talk about. I think that what happens with the figures is I play with them and change them and work on them, then suddenly they kind of look like a real interaction, I mean psychologically it's authentic. It has to have an inner life, a life of its own.
- Sally Quin:** I also think its notable that the figures in paintings of this period [the 1990s], despite their proximity, exist within very separate psychic worlds. They do not interact in obvious ways. Of course, this is true in reality, you know, no matter how intimate your relationship is with someone, you can't enter their world.
- Kevin Robertson:** I think that, especially in the 90s, I was quite pessimistic about people being able to function in relationships and all that sort of thing, so in that sense that's accurate.
- Sally Quin:** I'm wondering how it feels to see your work distilled in this way. How do you think it might inform your practice in the future, as an artist in mid-career?
- Kevin Robertson:** Well, I think it's an incredible luxury to be in this position in many ways, where you can kind of pause your career. Normally as an artist you have to cram things in, while you're working and all sorts of things, and you don't have a lot of time to reflect. The pause button is on and I can walk around and look at everything. There is a kind of gravity, I think, to having the retrospective. I have a perspective I wouldn't have had before, and it means that I can become even more uncompromising. I can be more involved, more resolute, in what I want to do.

* Abridged text of an interview held on the occasion of the exhibition, *Kevin Robertson: Paintings 1984-2022*, Lawrence Wilson Art Gallery, The University of Western Australia (10 September-10 December 2022); transcribed by Tethys Robertson, edited and annotated by Sally Quin and Kevin Robertson.

1. On the Oddfellows see Sandra Murray, *Oddfellows: The Essence of Contemporary Western Australian Figurative Artists*, exhibition catalogue, Crawley, Lawrence Wilson Art Gallery, 1996.
2. See Christos M. Joachimides, Norman Rosenthal, Nicholas Serota, *A New Spirit in Painting*, exhibition catalogue, London, Royal Academy of Arts and Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1981.