

## Clarice Beckett Retrospective

# The subtle work of a much-neglected Australian artist

By John Christian  
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*Politically Incorrect: Clarice Beckett Retrospective*  
The Art Gallery of South Australia,  
August 6—September 19  
Bendigo Art Gallery, Victoria,  
September 30—October 31

A collection of 89 oil paintings by Clarice Beckett (1887-1935) recently exhibited in Sydney will soon be on show in other Australian cities. Beckett produced over 2,000 evocative landscapes from 1917 until her premature death in 1935. Recent exhibitions, and the latest retrospective in particular, have started to give this long-neglected artist the recognition she is due.

Clarice Beckett's paintings—invariably everyday landscapes or unadorned suburban vistas engulfed in fog, rain or hazy half-light—have a melancholic ethereal quality. Beckett's technique was free, rapid and unpretentious, and based on the recognition that artists must surrender themselves to the external world in order to transform nature's elements into artistic imagery.

In some she portrays the weather's influence on light, in others she brings to our attention tonal subtleties—half tones and muted colours usually missed by the casual observer. Night-lights are soft and pearly, often diffused through the rain and mist. Early morning and dusk light, with their velvet shadows, greys and nuanced pinks, are always delicately captured. People inhabiting her images are devoid of superfluous detail and created with adroit and confident brushstrokes.

*Wet Night Brighton* (1930) is perhaps typical. Imagine you are standing near a beachfront. There is no one in sight and a powerful sense of loneliness prevails as you are drawn deeper into what at first appears to be a blurred and apparently innocuous image. It is a wet night and you can only see a few metres ahead. The rain is falling on a rising sea squall. In the foreground are some telegraph poles providing form and character, and a single, almost somber light shines through the mist. There are no hard edges, only the soft atmospheric haze and drizzle.

*Beach Road* (1933), also included in the retrospective, is a semi-rural scene on a sunny day. Its main elements are a few brushed-in figures, the grey-tarred road, a T-Model Ford, the local corner shop, some trees and bushes, and the ubiquitous telegraph poles. While most of these objects are indistinct and almost out of focus the work has a strong internal cohesion and structural balance. This sunny scene, however, produces in the viewer an

ill-defined sadness or feeling of loss—an emotional reaction far easier to experience than to explain.

Born 1887, in Casterton, a rural west Victorian town, Beckett was inspired to paint by her mother. The quiet and sensitive young girl from the comfortable middle class family was also encouraged to study music, poetry, and the classic Greek tragedies, unusual activities in the small rural town. W. B. Yeats and Walt Whitman were to become her favourite poets.

Early charcoal drawing classes provided strong foundations for Beckett's later artistic insights into content, form and tone. Beckett's formal art training, however, did not really begin until she was 27. Her father was more concerned with marrying-off his daughter to one of the well-heeled gentlemen of the district.

With the help of some family friends who were artists, Beckett was able to persuade her father to allow her to attend the National Gallery School of Victoria in Melbourne. He agreed only on condition that Clarice's older sister accompanied her as a chaperone. At the National Gallery Beckett came under the tutelage of Frederick McCubbin, one of Australia's most respected painters and a leader of the country's impressionist school, and after long hours of anatomical drawing developed into an accomplished draftsman.

Looking beyond the conservative academic training of the National Gallery, Beckett was attracted to Max Meldrum, an outspoken artist, social commentator and opponent of the First World War, well known for his vocal and dogmatic attacks on Academic and Modernist theories.

Meldrum, who had developed his own artistic theory, "The Scientific Order of the Impressions", claimed that social decadence had given artists an exaggerated interest in colour and, to their detriment, were paying less attention to tone and proportion. Art, he said, should be a pure science based on optical analysis; its sole purpose being to place on the canvass the first ordered tonal impressions that the eye received. All adornments and narrative and literary references should be rejected.

Meldrum's radical eclecticism, pacifism and anti-establishment views attracted many young artists and one of Beckett's early exhibitions, in 1919, was a group show with students from Meldrum's private art school. While Meldrum credited her as his model student Beckett only embraced some of his theories, in particular his insistence that accurate tonal rendition should be the

main preoccupation of the artist and that the subjects be drawn from everyday life.

In 1924 she declared that her task was "to give a sincere and truthful representation of a portion of the beauty of nature and to show the charm of light and shade ... in correct tones so as to give as nearly as possible an exact illusion of beauty."

Beckett participated in eight group shows before her holding her first solo exhibition in 1923 at the prestigious Athenaeum Gallery in Collins Street, Melbourne. Every year for the next decade she held solo exhibitions at this gallery and her work was regularly reviewed in the city's leading newspapers. But critical support was not always forthcoming; in fact a number of critics sharply attacked her work.

*The Bulletin* described her paintings as "fogbound art" while the *Sun*'s critic claimed that Beckett "obscured individuality, she being temporarily of a cult, which muffles everything in a pall of opaque density". Another wrote that her paintings were a "dull reiteration of nature".

Beckett disregarded these harsh and superficial criticisms as part of a factional campaign against her mentor Meldrum and vigorously applied herself to her art. The more perceptive critics hailed her work as groundbreaking, some describing her as "the most original painter in Australia".

Her energies though began to be eroded by her own difficult family circumstances. Her father, a bank-manager, was a deeply conservative man and did little to assist her career. Despite the family's fairly comfortable situation, Clarice never had a studio and was forced to paint on the kitchen table or leave the house in early evening or mornings, her easel being the side of a small homemade cart in which she kept her paints and brushes.

When her mother fell ill in 1934, Clarice, who had never married, was made responsible for nursing and caring for her. Relations deteriorated with her father and Beckett lost touch with her artistic friends and began to lead a reclusive existence. Weekly letters to her sister indicated her growing disappointment that the critics were pigeonholing her as a myopic protégé of Max Meldrum.

In 1935, whilst out painting a winter night storm she caught a chill, which quickly developed into double pneumonia. She died a few days later in a state of physical and emotional exhaustion, apparently lacking the will to fight on.

A year later, the Athenaeum Gallery hosted a well-attended and critically acclaimed memorial exhibition of Beckett's paintings. The significance of Beckett's subtle work was soon forgotten, however, and her paintings put in storage in various locations. When they were rediscovered in 1970, more than 1,200 had been destroyed by the elements after being placed in open-sided farm shed, ravaged by the wind, rain and rodents for 30 years. Another 31 were destroyed in a house-fire.

Clarice Beckett's retrospective has been titled *Politically Incorrect* by its curators. This title is not all that helpful and does not explain the reasons for her 30-year neglect, nor does it correctly characterise her own outlook. One wonders if the title is an attempt to transform Beckett into a rebel and therefore a more marketable commodity.

But why was Beckett neglected for all these years?

The exhibition catalogue fails to satisfactorily answer this question. It simply asserts: "If she had been a man, many of her contemporaries believed that she would have been heralded as a great artist and her more challenging suburban object matter excused, even admired ... The momentous task of presenting a politically correct image to the Australian public and to audience abroad ... was the male prerogative."

Without denying in any way the great difficulties that confronted women artists at this time, this does not address the fact that women artists such as Margaret Preston, Thea Proctor, Grace Cossington-Smith and others, were recognised and given wider acknowledgment than Beckett after their deaths.

The reasons for the neglect of Beckett's work are complex and cannot be fully examined in this initial appreciation. New artistic trends were beginning to emerge in Australia in the mid- to late-1930s. Beckett's isolation, death and later neglect took place in a period of transition.

A new generation of more confident and socially radical Australian artists—Albert Tucker, Arthur Boyd, Sydney Nolan and many others—were part of, and the outcome of, an intellectual revival that began to capture public imagination and challenge the conservative critics and schools of art under which Beckett had suffered.

Clarice Beckett was a courageous and deeply intelligent artist, whose tonal range and painting technique had never been seen before in Australia. Had she lived longer, Beckett would have made an even more substantive contribution.

Perhaps the final word should come from Walt Whitman, one of Beckett's favourite poets. Amongst her papers was a cherished and well-worn copy of *Leaves of Grass*. The following lines were underlined:

*All truths wait in all things,  
They neither hasten their own delivery nor resist it,  
They do not need the obstetric forceps of the surgeon,  
The insignificant is as big to me as any.  
What is less or more than a touch?*

How poignantly this sums up Beckett's art, her work and attitude to life.

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