DUNJA RMANDIC

Wolfgang Sievers and the Revisionism of Australian Migrant Art

Abstract

This paper contends that in looking to Australian migrant art, such as that of the German–Australian photographer Wolfgang Sievers, we can better understand the significance and politics of revisionist discourse in this country and begin a much needed enquiry: to rethink the historiography of modernism in Australia. Drawing on the experience of migrant identity situated between the past and the present (and potential future) – the present now represented by the new Australian locality – the concept of the 'in-between' and identity renegotiation that is implicit here are seen to condition and structure the local settler culture more so than the concept of provincialism. It is the dynamic of the 'in-between' (both cultural and psychological) with its postcolonial implications, with which Australian art historical revisionism is ultimately concerned, and it is through modernist migrant art that this condition can best be understood and articulated.[1]

Over the past twenty years, Australian art historians have struggled to reassess the contribution of the post-Second World War migrant artists to Australian art history. Establishing an effectual framework for this project has been met with little to no success. The work of German–Australian photographer Wolfgang Sievers, for example, has been institutionalised under the safe banner of modernism, yet the problems posed by such definition and institutionalisation in terms of art production and reception in Australia have not been taken into account. Nor has the already viable revisionist framework, instrumental in re-modelling Australian art history over the past two decades, been considered in accounts of migrant art. An enquiry into how and to what degree émigré artists have responded to the presumably inherent provincial condition of Australian culture and society, and how their local artistic efforts can be considered in terms of revisionism, reveals crucial elements in the structure of the revisionist framework. The work of Wolfgang Sievers serves as the catalyst for this analysis, largely because his work illuminates the condition of 'settler art', the condition which embodies the dynamic that revisionism identifies as the driving force of Australian art practice. This article starts with the premise that the very name 'Australia' denotes a country defined by the settler–colonialists, either before or after settlement. In referring to the 'settler' culture, I am referring explicitly to the non-Indigenous element of Australian society, regardless of whether someone would consider her or himself a settler. The term relates less to a particular period in history, the nature of occupation or nationality than it does to a mentality: it is thus psychological and political, as the revisionist writing reveals. The terms 'settler' and 'migrant' are in the present context interchangeable.

REVISIONISM AND LOCALITY

Revisionism seeks to question the applicability or viability of certain ideas and narratives about art, culture, social relations, politics and even sport that no longer, or are no longer able to, account for the dynamic of society. Explicit within the framework of revisionism in Australian cultural and artistic discourse is a postcolonial questioning of the nature of Australian national identity. It is postcolonial in two respects. On the one hand it re-reads the dependence of the local settler culture on the perceived 'centre' (that is Europe and America). On the other hand, it focuses on the exclusion of Aboriginal perspectives and histories by illuminating the settler culture's awareness of Aboriginal presence, an awareness spanning the entire period of settlement.[2]

The first of these forms of postcolonialism is based on power relations between the 'centre' and the 'periphery'. In Australia, this relation has been vociferously debated by writers and artists including Paul Foss, Imants Tillers, Ian Burn and Terry Smith since the early 1980s. The majority of analyses undertaken by these writers were heavily reliant on postmodernism's central idea of appropriation. As a postcolonial nation whose history has been (and continues to be) dominated by social and cultural dependence on other countries, the definition of Australia as 'provincial' has been derived from observing local appropriations of other cultures.[3]

The second postcolonial form that revisionism takes (the one, I argue, that is central to the discourse itself) is concurrent with the settler's negotiation of her presence on someone else's land. What revisionism in Australian art seeks to do is to find a possibility of originality in Australian culture within this relationship of dependency. It simultaneously strives to account for the impact of the colonial past and the uncertain national identity that this entails. In this respect, the revisionist strategy is to read the work of local artists through a double agenda. The first acknowledges that cultural production in Australia essentially derives from 'elsewhere', whilst the second accounts for this 'elsewhere' against the backdrop of both European colonisation and the complex interactions between indigenous and settler cultures in Australia. The dialectic that informs such revisionism is crucial to the phenomenology of Australian identity and the formation of Australian locality. As art historian Rex Butler has identified, revisionism is concerned with finding and witnessing the moment of Australia's 'birth.'[4] This process demands a continual negotiation between the settler cultures and indigenous cultures, specifically within the contexts of politics, the arts and material production. Here, the settler's negotiation of identity is considered inseparable from an active reflection and experience of location. Reconciling the past (or the homeland) with the present (or the

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[2] For such analyses see Butler, 2005. The main point of Butler's work is to revise revisionist strategies that have prevailed to date. The circularity that Butler faces in this task is inherent in the act of revisionism itself, while also providing a more complex reading of the culture with which this task is concerned. In this sense, revisionism reveals the phenomenological particulars of Australian culture.

[3] See Terry Smith, 1974, pp. 54–9.

[4] Butler, 2005, pp. 15–18. This term 'birth' is particularly significant to Butler given his investment in Lacanian discourse. Butler's analysis of Julia Ciccarone's work addresses the form that this search for origins can take in art. Ciccarone's work is emblematic of this 'symptom' in art and serves perfectly to illuminate the methodology Butler outlines. See Butler, 2005.

new locality) dominates the basis of such negotiation. Two recent examples of these respective types of readings are provided by Terry Smith's analysis of the work of modernist artist Margaret Preston and Rex Butler's work on the nineteenth century artist Augustus Earle.[5]

The underlying focus of postcolonial and revisionist writings such as these is the settler negotiation of 'self' in Australia – or, as Butler might say, the 'birth' of the self in Australia – as the principal dynamic of cultural and specifically artistic production.[6] The source of this identifiable dynamic is Bernard Smith's *European Vision and the South Pacific* (1960), which articulated how this 'self' becomes the subject (though not directly or explicitly) of local art.[7] Smith posited that the evolution of ideas in Australia is essentially dialectical: externally generated concepts are not simply imported and assimilated but are also *transformed* by the experience of the locality into a hybrid form, which in turn informs the national tradition.[8] The local culture, despite its dependence and isolation, is given agency, hence opening the door to the possibility of an 'original' Australian culture. This originality is located in 'Australia's' *interpretation of* influences and concepts, particularly as manifest in the work produced here.[9] As Peter Beilharz argues in relation to Smith's work, the dynamic between the 'new' and the 'old' land is defined as traffic rather than dominance.[10] Over the past several decades, this contingent relationship has come to delineate the 'antipodean' identity, which as Beilharz remarks is, "constructed between centre and periphery, across imperialism and place."[11] The dialectic structure of this relationship was central to early critiques of Antipodean logic in the 1980s and now stands as a significant precursor of revisionism.

THE IN-BETWEEN

The spatio-temporal 'in-between' – between prior knowledge and new experience, between the old home and the new – that structures the migrant and settler experience of perpetual negotiation is inseparable from the constitution of the subject, that is, 'Australia'. 'The subject' in such context is an agent not only in sociological, historical and cultural terms but, more pointedly, in art-historical revisionist terms it is simultaneously the painter and the painted. In this sense, revisionist analyses of the 1980s emphatically bracketed the phenomenology of Australian culture and identity within postmodern terms: these were used to account for not only contemporary negotiations but

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[5] See Smith, 2002, pp. 47–91 and Butler, 2002, pp. 115–26.

[6] See footnote 4.

[7] Smith's work presents this relationship in a subtle yet thorough way. To an extent, as Rex Butler has stated, "it is only after revisionism that Smith's work becomes readable". Butler, 2005, p. 12.

[8] In his first publication on Australian art, Smith acknowledges this same crucial point. See Smith, 1945, pp. 30–31.

[9] Smith also recognised this as early as 1945 when he published his first book, *Place, Taste and Tradition*. See Smith, 1945. This stress on interpretation of Australia as the place where originality resides locally was also argued in Burn, 1988, pp. 41 and 43.

[10] Beilharz, 1997, p. 51.

[11] Beilharz, 1997, p. 51.

also historical negotiations of identity, locality and place, inchoate in the first British encounters with Australian land.[12]

Locating the 'subject' is akin to a search for origin, a birth, which is imperative for the settler negotiation of the self in relation to this 'foreign' land. Paul Carter in his book *Living in a New Country* (1992) has explained that essays on the question of 'what is a new country?' and 'is life possible in a new country?' can be "poetic devices, creating metaphorical connections where more logical ones fail".[13] In interacting with any given place we may either assess our relation to it logically or can instead adopt a poetic manner of bringing ourselves to it, although the latter is achieved with more ease than the former. The concept of nostalgia operates on this same principle: at its core is also the internalised poetics of self-historicising and self-location.

Carter writes: "the migrant does not arrive once and for all but continues to arrive, each new situation demanding a new set of responses, almost a new identity".[14] This postulate has a direct bearing on the construction of the self by settlers and migrants alike. Carter accounts for both the migrant experience and the 'settler–migrant' experience with recourse to a postmodern discursive framework. There are certain parallels between Carter's 'constant arrival' and Bernard Smith's considerations of the first European experiences of the land. Smith's ideas resonate in Carter's contention that, "to live in a new country is to insist on the provisional nature of appearances, on the arbitrariness of names: this might be a table but it might also be a *tabula rasa.*"[15]

It is at this point that the significance of aesthetics in imagining one's locality emerges. Activating the 'poetics of a space' depends on an aesthetic perception and interpretations that are both subjective and immediate.[16] In the process of nostalgic reflection, the surface of memories may become the memories themselves. By implication, the history and knowledge of the settler or the migrant may then also give rise to coincidences between two locations that mirror the aesthetic experience. Carter's *Living in a New Country*, for example, opens with an account of a visit to Italy but the reading of the space is contingent upon one's own experience of the country of origin.[17] Most significantly, it is a matter of necessarily occupying two (symbolic) spaces simultaneously: the past (through nostalgia) and the present (with the implication of the future). By positioning oneself within these spaces simultaneously one inhabits the 'in-between' space, both symbolic and tangible. The 'in-between' is fundamentally utopian; it is a 'nowhere'. The place that one once occupied and called home persists without the subject: it develops a history of its own of which the subject will never be a part.

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[12] The experience of hybrids and strange associations between European flora and fauna is a particularly vivid illustration of this point. See Smith, 1989.

[13] Carter, 1992, p. 3.

[14] Carter, 1992, p. 3.

[15] Carter, 1992, p. 5.

[16] 'Poetics of Space' is a term borrowed from Gaston Bachelard's seminal work on the psychology and the poetics of space as constructed through our experience of houses, or more precisely 'our' house, investigating more broadly the phenomenology of imagination and aesthetics in intimate contexts. See Bachelard, 1958 (1994).

[17] Carter, 1992, pp. 1–4.

Simultaneously, the new location occupied by the subject will never be experienced as a fully 'known space' and it is possible that the subject will never entirely feel a part of this acquired history and a very real context.[18]

The psychological and physical displacement of the subject bears upon not only the migrant experience but is also central to the postmodern notion that identity is not tied to a place, nor can it be considered as a fixed entity. Identity is instead contingent, relative and in a perpetual state of flux. Paul Foss, for example, describes identity as, "a state of flux, one in which there can be no attachment to a particular time and, more importantly, to a particular concrete and culturally unified position in space."[19] Because of the complex composition of the Australian population, and especially because of the contradicting accounts of its history, the definition of Australia (culturally or nationally) perpetually resists coherent unification. In its eclectic and active appropriation of the cultural base, 'Australia' is instead always open to redefinition. The national condition mirrors the postmodern conception of identity as fragmentary, and most significantly, relative to a given context.[20] As Carter's work demonstrates, it is only through the aesthetics of the 'in-between' that we can allow ourselves to become implicated in a new context.[21]

Aesthetic experience thus plays an integral part in not only the way in which one relates to the world, but also how subjects can determine their position (locale) within a given context. In Australia, this is crucial in considering the status of migrants and settlers as the spatio-temporal 'in-between.' In the negotiation of our experience in and of Australia, the politics of our presence comes to the fore. Both historically and within contemporary society, such a negotiation has lead to disassociation of identity from the soil on which 'we stand', explicitly conflating politics and aesthetics. This conflation is further illuminated by Carter's observation that:

> We live in our places off the ground; and … we idealize the picturesqueness of places because we sense our ungroundedness, the fragility of our claim on the soil. Our carefully enclosed ornamented places, with their artillery of hedges, views, roads, boundaries and horizons, grow out of the sacrifice of the ground and are, in this sense, non-places.[22]

Both Carter and Bernard Smith trace the aesthetic fascination with Australia, linking it with efforts of the settlers to legitimise their presence in Australia and to justify, either consciously or unconsciously, the displacement of the native peoples with the idea of *terra nullius*.

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[18] This can also be true of language: in a new country one might not speak as much of the native language, trying to assimilate into English, while never quite grasping the intricacies and 'the feeling' of English. On the form of migrant language in a new country see Gunew, 1988.

[19] Foss, 1988, p. 1.

[20] One needs to be careful to avoid bland generalisations of cultures and identities as being 'postmodern'. The uncritical and excessive use of the term negates its meaning and turns it into a tool of cheap criticism.

[21] Carter, 1992.

[22] Carter, 1996, p. 2.

Yet it is precisely the *failed denial* of Aboriginal presence that has come to dominate Australian art, albeit implicitly, and that haunts Australian culture. Whether immediately apparent or not, the negotiation of this new space is hence dependent on the aesthetic faculties with which we comprehend our environment. The recognition of this aesthetic sphere of our experience is paramount when attempting to define identity in relation to the space we occupy. The identity and history brought by the settlers and migrants must be renegotiated in this new space.

WOLFGANG SIEVERS AND AUSTRALIAN MODERNISM

Wolfgang Sievers migrated to Australia from Germany in 1938 at the age of twenty-five.[23] Prior to his migration, Sievers attended Berlin's Contempora School of Applied Arts (an offshoot of the Bauhaus school shut down by the Nazis) where he was introduced to New Photography and the modernist aesthetic integral to Bauhaus philosophy. While studying in Berlin, Sievers worked as a photographer for advertising companies and travelled to Portugal to photograph architecture for his private projects. Migrating to Australia shortly before the Second World War, Sievers began to produce photographs here of modernist architecture and modes of modern production in factories, power plants and university research centres, that were crucial to the post-war image Australia was trying to promote.[24] For over fifty years Sievers worked in the industry and architecture sector before retiring in the late 1980s. In Australia, Sievers is best known for his photographs of industry and architecture. His most frequently exhibited and widely seen photograph is *Gears for the Mining Industry* (1967) (**ill. 1**). This image was featured on an Australian stamp and appeared on the covers of two publications on Sievers' work.[25] It was also included in most of the exhibitions that Sievers participated in, becoming, in a sense, a Sievers index.

Contrary to predominant analyses, I suggest that Sievers' works do not present a straightforward narrative of Australian modernism. Rather, there is an element of distancing and division that underlies his images that is generated from the friction between his New Photography aesthetic and Australian subject matter. This element forms the 'connotative' message of Sievers' images: the distancing effect presents the viewer with an alternative meaning of the subject matter and image construction, one that is more reflective of the locality's influence on image production than an institutional analysis of Sievers' work would allow.[26] It is this element that also facilitates an alliance between Sievers' photography and the wider context of revisionist discourse.

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[23] For an overview of Sievers' life see Calado, 2000; Ennis, 1991.

[24] Sievers commenced his career immediately upon arrival, but shortly after the war started he was proclaimed an 'enemy alien' and interned in an internment camp until the end of the war. He continued his photographic work there, producing portrait photographs of the army personnel.

[25] Australia Post, May 1991. See Sievers, 1998; and Helen Ennis (ed.), *The Life and Work of Wolfgang Sievers*, exh.cat. An Australian National Gallery Travelling Exhibition, Canberra: National Gallery of Australia, 1991.

[26] Barthes, 1997, pp. 20–22.

The evocation in *Gears for the Mining Industry* of Fritz Lang's 1926 film *Metropolis*, for example, through extreme contrasts of black and white, unorthodox construction of the set and a sense of gesture rather than toil, has already been discussed.[27] However, rather than heralding the arrival of industrial utopia as some critics suggest, I argue that it is precisely this reference that signals an awareness of distance from the very scene that it depicts rather than announcing the arrival of industrial utopia.[28] Representing a relatively new industrial context in Australia, this evocation is more than just a visual allusion. It is rather a juxtaposition of the European, and more generally Western, manifestation of modernity and its Australian counterpart that implies the time lag to which Australia is inevitably subjected. The social, cultural, and class-based predicaments that Europe faced during the intense industrialisation of Lang's era could not be felt in their entirety in Australia. The supposedly stilled movement of the worker on one half of the gear serves to highlight the unity of man and machine that Sievers sought to convey.[29] However, in engaging with such a socialist and ultimately utopian condition, Sievers has in the case of *The Gears* created a 'still' from a silent film that transports a metaphorical 1926 moment in Europe to a 1967 industrial moment in Australia. The awareness of the forty years between the two moments is not only telling of the temporal gap, and therefore of Australian 'provincialism', but more importantly suggests a diachronic mental convergence borne out of a real moment in the new locality.

Contrary to the claim by writer and curator Helen Ennis that Sievers' photographs could have been taken "anywhere" in the industrialised world, the full effect of this photograph ultimately relies on its context.[30] Roland Barthes' concept of the 'connotative meaning' is here key.[31] For Barthes, the connotative message is a photograph's 'second' meaning (the first being denotative, or "the necessarily real thing" in front of the camera),[32] which emerges with the 'coding' of a photograph. The crux of Barthes' argument is that 'connotation' is historical: it is defined by the spatio-temporal context in which it is created. Only with prior knowledge that the work was created in Australia can we access the most abundant meaning of Sievers' composition. It is only when placed in this context, in the context of Australian locality, that the construction of a *Metropolis*-like image in 1967 assumes its more pertinent meaning.

Sievers' implementation of the modernist aesthetic signals an awareness of Australian 'time lag': by selecting an image of the industry in its infancy, the work questions rather than catalogues the industrial tools of production (**ills 2, 3, 4**). This decision highlights the context of the images' production, so as to convey particular aspects of the cultural and psychological condition of Australia. In Europe, *Metropolis* is a metaphor; in Australia it represents, paradoxically, nostalgia for something that could never occur and a yearning for the possibility of its occurrence. *Gears* trades upon an element of the

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[27] Calado, 2000, p. 219; McFarlane, 1992; Sievers, 1991.

[28] Sievers asked for the gear to be dismembered and placed in the way it appears in the photograph; the man on the gear, defined by dramatic body movement, is measuring the teeth – a useless task given than the giant gear has already been constructed; for his account of the construction of the image see Ennis, 1997.

[29] See Calado, 2000, pp. 219–222.

[30] Ennis, 1997, p. 116.

[31] Barthes, 1997, pp. 20–21.

[32] Barthes, 1981, p. 76.

fantastic, of science fiction: it toys with the idea of *Metropolis* taking place in Australia. The image is not a straightforward depiction of either Australian industry or its aesthetic quality and impact. Sievers' subject lies elsewhere. It is a product of displacing and displacement. And it is precisely this displaced cultural manifestation, a European moment cradled in a specific Australian locality, that creates the tension with which Australian postcolonial art and discourse are concerned.[33]

LANDSCAPE TRADITIONS

A reading of the Australian land as a vast and empty space is a settler reading of this landscape. Even after discarding the notion of *terra nullius* (with its undertones of *tabula rasa*) as an official characteristic of this land, the fact that we still live around the edges of the country continues to determine how we read the ontology of our dwelling here.[34] The settler reading of the landscape as 'vast and empty', waiting for the settler 'imprint', has been a constant in Australian history. Sievers' black and white aerial photographs (**ills. 5, 6**), despite falling under the rubric of commercial work, engage with this terrain. They also contain an intriguing visual and discursive agenda. Although these aerial images of Australian 'bush' map a territory, what they actually represent is the white man's exploitation of the land in a visual reference of the settler presence in Australia. Perhaps more importantly, they also engender a feeling of temporary occupation. The unequivocal presence of power plants, mines and factories in an 'unoccupied' landscape devoid of supporting infrastructure points to the seemingly random and alienated infiltration of industry. The images convey something of Ed Ruscha's parking lots, the terrain resembling an archaeological site.[35] Time and space are disrupted through these industrialised yet classical landscape signifiers: are we looking at an abandoned project or one newly begun? Are these remnants of a past civilisation or precursors of a newly flourishing one?

For some critics, Sievers' focus on the signs of modernity, industry (**ills. 1 and 7**) and architecture (**ill. 8**) are incompatible with the accepted tropes of the Australian landscape tradition. According to Ennis, the quintessential 'Australian landscapes' are those of the bush and the beach: strong light features prominently in this tradition as a marker of 'man's' subordination to nature and a means of illuminating the real and perpetual struggle between the European inhabitant and the rugged landscape.[36] In a similar vein to the aerial photographs, Sievers' images of universities and city architecture (**ills. 8, 9 10**)

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[33] On arriving in Australia, European migrants often lament the provincial state of their new location. Such judgement is often grounded in the lack of visible 'culture', or more particularly, the lack of historical and modern architecture that would otherwise signify a strong narrative of the past and simultaneously define a clear path towards the future. This absence may be regarded as a failure on the part of the new locality to establish itself as a distinct cultural entity. In other words, the migrants' experiences, and thus their expectations, are not reciprocated by the state of their material surrounds. Hence, from their initial encounter of a lack, migrants impose this mode of reference on other elements of their experiences in the new land. Sievers' experience, one of many both after the war and in more recent times, also mirrored this reading of the new country as 'lacking'. For Sievers, see Sievers, 2005.

[34] See Beilhartz, 2005.

[35] 'Thirty-four parking lots' (1967).

[36] Ennis, 1997, p. 116.

are constructed in such a way that each building is isolated rather than integrated in its environment. It is precisely this isolation, this element of distancing, that defines the 'Australian' aspect of these works. If, as Ennis suggests, representations of the Australian landscape delineate an Australian subject matter, then Sievers' photographs of Monash University and the University of Melbourne are Sievers' version of this subject matter.

In images such as *Menzies and Union Building* (1968) **(ill. 11)** and *Raised View of Union and Menzies Buildings* (1966) **(ill. 12)**, Sievers conveys the essence of locality by keeping open space, which assumes a symbolic as well as a denotative meaning, as a central element even among the newly constructed modernist buildings **(ills. 11, 13)**. Sievers' images of the two universities are instilled with a sense of randomness and contingency that extends and exacerbates the sense of displacement and negotiation at the heart of his aerial compositions. The post-war architectural trends of High Modernism, Functionalism, Internationalism and Brutalism made their appearances in Australia in the 1950s and 1960s, particularly in the construction of universities, government institutions and commercial buildings. While this incursion of modernist architecture was a breath of fresh air for Sievers and many architects at the time headed by Robin Boyd, Sievers' images resist positioning these structures as a contribution to Internationalism; rather, they indicate an implicit contradiction in their existence and location.[37] The Monash University photographs are a case in point. Here, a sense of a particular kind of lack or an absence of something that would otherwise complement the display of modernity prevails. The vast, open space in which these buildings are shot and framed, for instance in the photographs of the Brownless Library **(ill. 14)**, Union House **(ill. 15)** or the Menzies Building **(ill. 8),** gives the impression that they have been constructed elsewhere and placed, almost at random, in this otherwise empty terrain. On the most elementary level, these buildings seem to have neither a context that grounds them nor the infrastructure or history to justify their presence. As with *Gears*, the subject seems to be (as with European culture in Australia) conceived elsewhere and displaced.

The ethical and revisionist 'space' for this displacement is created in the recognition of its existence, at the point at which the negotiation of its presence in a locality becomes legible. Revisionism encourages an active reading of each particular photograph, a reading that encourages a deeper understanding of the history and overall context in which this work was grounded. In this analysis, the context has been stretched to encompass Sievers' own history: His 'aesthetic' can be seen as both a product of his training as a European modernist photographer and his double exposure to European and Australian modernities. Expanding the discursive field enables a position from which Australian locality, be it industry, architecture or landscape, can be re-read. In Australia, where the origin of every remnant of culture is questioned and scrutinised, where the state of fluctuation and contingency is considered to be a viable way of 'being Australian' – a paradox justified by postmodernist, postcolonial and revisionist discourses – the visually jarring effect of Sievers' photographs, in their uneasy combination of modernity,

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[37] Boyd's views on the state and development of architecture in Australia were voiced in his 1960 publication *Australian Ugliness*, and his views shared with European émigré architects Frederick Romberg and Harry Seidler. For an overview of the Australian experiences of migrant artists, including Sievers, Margaret Michaelis and Frederick Romberg, see Butler, 1997.

modernism and the landscape, denies a simple reading of his works as merely promoting a modernist aesthetic.

Dunja Rmandic is currently doing a Masters in Curatorship at the University of Melbourne, with a particular focus on trends in cultural and historical revisionism both in European cultures and in the Antipodean periphery. This paper has been derived from her Honours Thesis in Art History completed in 2005 and a paper given for Melbourne University postgraduate conference Flux in 2006.

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