A balanced look at Nolan

Art

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WITH his third annual January showing of oils, prints and crayon and dyes on paper by Sidney Nolan, Christopher Day at Paddington, Sydney, is presenting his most balanced and possibly best selection to date.

As usual they come from afar – New York, Sweden, London, as well as from various civilised spots in Australia. There is a lot of chance in such a selection in the sense that it derives from Mr Day's taste, which leans towards the exotic and dramatic – in two cases verging on the melodramatic, something so rare in Nolan that it looks almost satirical. But more of that later.

It is fine that Mr Day's dedication does not include a dependence on Nolan's early works, for there are those, usually ignorant of his later excursions, who act as if he had painted nothing of importance since his 30s, except for some panoramic desert scenes and writhing carcases. One way of not liking Picasso is to adore only his blue period; one way of ignoring Nolan's prolific genius is to ride off into the Philistine Mountains with Ned Kelly following some 1947 maps.

Younger commentators will have to become used to the idea that artists like Monet, Bonnard, Miro and Picasso will hang in there refining and deepening their art, sometimes with the careless abandon they have earned, despite all the challenges of age and fresh fashions.

a 1962 Kelly from Sweden; done in scribbled, scratchy, transparent sepia. Kelly falls beneath a white sky into a white desert, his head rising, eyes closed as if in a death mask, above his crouched back, as if an apotheosis were healing all disjunctions.

The body is as dry and diaphanous as old gum leaves; the sketchy, sparse landscape is a desert for saints. In last month's *Quadrant*, Hugh Morgan declared that Nolan's Kelly is a "competitor in the post-Christian religious market place" and that church leaders in the past would have attacked such symbols as anti-Christ. Actually nothing is secularised in this image; quite the contrary in his 1962 series of images of the fragility of the flesh but toughness of the spirit. Admittedly they were little known, only being shown in 1979 at London's Marlborough Gallery.

Seemingly adrift

Kelly is a rather lost, awkward effigy in another work powerful for the opposite reasons: it is an entanglement of naked, pale fawn gum trunks emerging from a brown opaque river and billabong and tending to interweave and coalesce. Kelly seems

that Lord Clark pronounced of unprecedented savagery. But here the lonely miner is an insubstantial pink about to dissolve into the opaque background lit by a lonely moon. The brown and white caricature of a dog seems as bereft of purpose as the miner; the world seems only fit for transients.

Nolan wants his creatures to appear alien yet likely to be naturally absorbed and even annihilated by the environment like the prone explorer in one of the crayon works or on the verge of dissolution like the camel in *Burke and Wills*.

There is but one figure of the camel, a naked Burke, I presume, an unlikely explorer, vulnerable yet defiant, perched on a diaphanous camel, which seems to me to have an ironical grimace. Camels with such expressions are hard to meet, but Nolan has obviously done so with their naked riders here defying nature and commonsense, set against dark red hills of such compelling authenticity that they convince one of the reality of man and beast.

Painted in 1964, it reveals how much Nolan uses reality to reinforce fantasy, as he does in the series of scratched and scraped crayons stained with fabric dyes on paper: a lonely girl carries a flower across a rosy desert with all the sublime infinity of a Caspar David Friedrich; landscape peaks and rhythmical strata become a dark and mystical sea; a man accompanies a bird as odd as himself

gloomy wastes or perched on an orange cliff are melodramatic, but in the sense that much recent neo-expressionism seeks forced effects.

Among the prints, which include the Kelly II and Kelly III sets, is the 1973 Kelly of pure expressionism with its lacerated helmet and a faint rider seen through the aperture. A single tree trunk cuts the blackened landscape lit by a swish of greenish yellow. It is a powerful print.

A feeling of insecurity

The other prints are familiar enough and familiarity should now breed acceptance of the loose, slippery pale prints of the naked Kelly near a rickety bridge, or on the grey foreshore of a shattered no-man's-land, or along by the bridge that crosses to the distant shore that is a reddened, tattered pile. All have a haunting feeling of insecurity.

There are two tiny works from the collection of the late Lord Clark, a friend of Nolan's from the late '40s; one is a Blakean sickle moon with a figure of exquisite tenderness and the other, called *Snake*, is like a primitive flower in a football guernsey.

Thousands of these composed the giant mural, *Snake*, seen in Dublin, on BBC television, and on the northern wall of the Great Hall of Sydney University. That seems

deep psychological need, the portrait seems here to stay whether it is only to be a big brother or big sister in every room. At Waltons in Sydney are 71 of the rejected Archibald entries; that leaves about 200 still unseen! Were there gross injustices?

Hardly, but there were surely some borderline cases in this group: Margaret Ackland's portrait of Brian Gore, Sally Montague's of Sir David Hughes, Rachel Rovay's lively look at Paul Cox, Vaike Liibus' glowing survey of Rod Milgate and Peter Ingenillem's pale portrait of Mum Shirl with pale vignettes of the area in which she has worked so assiduously and honourably (what a lot of women).

There were others, but it is a little depressing; one feels that the freedom granted by this century has been spurned. You would think our young painters would seize it with the vigour of Nolan's Kelly.

Kelly With A Gun : fragility