

NOLAN THROUGH KELLY

Damian Smith

Sidney Nolan is well known for his iconic depictions of the saga of notorious nineteenth century outlaw Ned Kelly. The most famous of these paintings are the works in the first Kelly series, painted at Heide, the Melbourne home of John and Sunday Reed, between 1946 and 1947.¹ This series is firmly entrenched in the iconography of Australia's cultural heritage and continues to fascinate all those interested in our national identity. By virtue of their popularity alone, the first series has overshadowed Nolan's later Kelly works. For Nolan scholars, the prominence of the 1946–47 works, coupled with the task of examining the painter's enormous artistic output (which some researchers estimate to exceed ten thousand paintings and an even greater number of works on paper), has been a deterrent to any extensive study of Nolan's many Kelly paintings.

Nolan maintained a lifelong interest in the Kelly legend and periodically created new interpretations of the tale. He produced the bulk of his Kelly suites between 1945 and 1980, each marked by distinctly different styles. An inveterate storyteller, Nolan had a predilection for complex narratives. He interwove a range of subtexts into his Kelly paintings, as a means of broadening their implications and locating the Kelly myth within an international context of aesthetic and political discourses. At the same time much of his work is steeped in autobiographical references.

For Nolan, Kelly was an intensely compelling figure, who, in common with the artist, was of working-class Irish-Australian stock. Not only was he a decidedly Australian subject, he embodied the characteristics of a tragic heroic archetype. With his instinctive command of language and a preparedness to confront the world head on, the outlaw remained a figure of endless attraction. As Nolan's career developed, he became inextricably associated with Kelly and behind the square black mask, Nolan's Kelly can be revealed as an immensely complex figure whose significance reaches well beyond the shores of his native homeland.

The purpose of this exhibition is twofold. First, it presents a study of Nolan's extensive Kelly oeuvre, focusing on aspects of the works completed after the seminal 1940s series.² Second, it aims to consider Nolan in the context of his career beyond Australia and to examine the ways in which he located the Kelly legend within the cultural dialogues of his

era. By no means should all of Nolan's Kelly paintings be judged as masterpieces, nor should it be imagined that they were produced without regard for the market's insistent demand for his Ned Kelly imagery. However, as Tom Rosenthal notes in his recent monograph on the artist:

*Nolan, I believe wrongly, has often been—like a one-trick pony—critically shunted into a Kelly siding, with the first series often held up as the only Kellys that really matter. While it is true that there is some Kelly dross, some unforged Nolans that seem to be merely landscapes with a square black mask superimposed to make a picture more interesting and more saleable, Kelly at his best lasts for much longer than the forties paintings.*³

EUROPE 1950s

*The truth is I have not been able to settle down in Australia – and even though I find the country & the bush itself as beautiful as ever— do not think I am interested in staying here... In short it is not the landscape itself nor the colonial part of its history which I do not accept, but the present mediocre phase.*⁴

For Sidney Nolan the early 1950s marked a turning point in both his personal and professional life. With exhibitions being mounted in Sydney, Paris and Rome, he was rapidly emerging as a rising artistic star. Flush with a succession of sales, he made his first trip to Europe in 1950. After this initial period abroad, the prospect of resettling in Sydney lost any appeal and in 1953 he and his wife Cynthia made a final and decisive departure from Australia.

Residing in the London suburb of Paddington, Nolan was offered a solo exhibition at the Redfern Gallery. *Sidney Nolan: Paintings, Drawings*, opened on 3 May 1955 and included twelve newly completed Kelly paintings. With the exception of *Death of a poet* (1954), originally exhibited as *Death of an outlaw*,⁵ the new paintings reworked a number of the compositions of the first Kelly series of 1946–47, transformed by a restrained and evenly modulated palette. The art critic David Sylvester suggested that the exhibition 'should establish [Nolan] among the half dozen best painters under forty in the world today.'⁶ Colin MacInnes noted:

*The naïve style has gone, and the invented shapes are now intellectually more coherent, and plastically more ingenious; the colour, unlike those of the earlier landscapes, are luminous, rich and varied; while the presentation of the Kelly myth has gained a new magic and imaginative power.*⁷

Having now ‘arrived’ on the London art scene, Nolan was soon offered a retrospective exhibition by Bryan Robertson, Director of the Whitechapel Art Gallery, to mark the artist’s fortieth birthday. Nolan suggested that Robertson approach his former patrons, the Reeds, in the hope of including the first Kelly series along with other early works in the exhibition. The Reeds, however, were reluctant to part with any of the series and in the face of their refusal Nolan again produced a suite of new Kelly images. While several of the initial Kelly paintings from 1954–55 bore a strong resemblance to the first Kelly series,⁸ these new works were marked by both innovative compositions and a further refinement of the Kelly iconography. Abandoning the saga’s subplots and subsidiary characters, Nolan focused increasingly on the singular figure of the armoured Ned Kelly.

Paintings such as *Kelly, Spring* (1956), present the outlaw as an imposing and solitary figure whose presence at the front of the picture plane is dramatised by his pitch-black body-casing and rectangular metallic head. The face, however, is divided, one half fashioned by reductive constructivist geometry and the other by the tonal modulations of a primitive frescoed saint. Kelly’s singular eye turns inwards, suggesting a contemplative vulnerability. It is the closed eye of a sleeper whose dream may be the question of the painting. For Nolan the work held a near religious significance:

This painting came after I had done various paintings of Kelly as a busbranger—it is a more universal application of Kelly. This was one drawn with the blossom as a kind of strong totem figure. I tried to transfigure it into a kind of celebration of Spring as if it is all suddenly hushed for a minute. You hope to get through to some sort of sacramental feeling. I came back into this picture to see what happened to experience when I put it into the old familiar mould. The image of Kelly became the touchstone of my progression as a painter. 9

However, his remarks do not account for the peculiar facial configuration, which points existentially to a crisis of representation. Arising from a bygone era, Kelly bears the encroaching scar of the modern world’s dehumanising forces, exposing what many in the postwar era identified as the Cold War’s pervasive dread. In light of the ideological tensions occurring throughout Europe in the 1950s, this stylistic collision was indicative of the artist’s capacity to unite divergent dialogues in a single image. In *Kelly, Spring*, violence and humanism, nature and machine are depicted in close proximity. For Nolan such

counterpoints were the key coordinates of the European psyche and the source of what he saw as its inevitable demise. In an interview with Peter Fuller, the artist commented:

*When I got to Europe, after the war, I saw that I'd come to witness the decline of the west. All the Spengler I'd read sort of clicked into place. Of course, this was wonderful, in one sense, but in another, it was tragic.*¹⁰

Similarly, in 1964 the artist felt that 'The concept of the hero has been doomed by European experience—from Nietzsche onwards, culminating in Hitler.'¹¹

Perhaps to underline the contemporary concerns embodied in the figure of Kelly, Nolan made a direct and overt connection between Kelly's essentially tragic tale and the failed Hungarian uprising of 1956 in the painting *Hungary* (1956).¹² Here, as in *Kelly Spring*, the outlaw's head is weighted with clustered constructivist squares. This symbol of an erstwhile utopian modernity carries an oppressive air, against which the outlaw's stoic resistance plays in the hint of a half-formed smile. In place of a rifle, Kelly clutches a white dove, its flight to freedom stifled. This apparent retort to Picasso's bird of peace suggests a summary disenchantment, encapsulating the artist's vision of Europe's ultimate decline. Within a year of completing *Hungary*, Nolan reconnected Kelly with an emphatically Australian scene, his mask and torso arising spectrally in the macabre *Kelly and Drought* (1957). Here the wide-reaching Queensland drought of 1953 forms the basis of a modern tragedy, derived as much, as Nolan well knew, through the poor management of land as the caprice of Mother Nature. The image both celebrates and critiques the relationship between Australia's grazier culture and the harshness of the arid interior. In rebuking the hubris of modern agriculture this veritable 'jolly roger' of a composition raises the flag over Australia's barren otherness; not a painting to live with but a manifesto against the hero's destructive trajectory. *AMERICA 1958–1960* In 1958 Nolan was awarded a two-year Commonwealth Harkness Fellowship, enabling him to travel and paint in America. Acutely aware of the stylistic changes that were taking place in his work, Nolan foresaw this period as one in which the external environment would inevitably shape his painting: *I've changed... The young-thing that one paints out of, when one's energy is directed to altering and shaping the world around one, that has changed. Now I know that in future the world around, life, experience, whatever it is, will shape my paintings.*¹³ The pervasive influence of New York's abstract expressionists can be observed in works from 1958–1960, evident in the sweeping formations and haptic mark-making which now preoccupied the artist. In the

setting of his New York studio, surrounded by the new American painting, Nolan again returned to his preferred mythic subjects and Kelly momentarily re-emerged. He produced at least six striking Kelly paintings executed in the new medium of polyvinyl acetate.¹⁴ In paintings such as *Kelly at Glenrowan* (1959–60), the gestural potential of PVA is exploited using a window washer's squeegee instead of a conventional paintbrush, giving rise to a newly conceived *tachisme*. The underlying composition is laid down in passages of reds and sombre browns then blocked in with rectangles of indigo, to create a layered effect in which Kelly appears as a dissolving or translucent figure. The mythic dimensions of the Kelly saga were revisited by Sidney and Cynthia during their trip across America. According to Cynthia, in her memoir *Open Negative*, published in 1967, in Lincoln County the couple witnessed a re-enactment of the story of the outlaw Billy the Kid, which Sidney immediately compared with the Ned Kelly tale.¹⁵ A lively discussion ensued involving the whole family: *'There's so much that's like Ned Kelly's history,' he was muttering, 'Billy was loyal to his mates, the local authorities couldn't catch him, squadrons of the U.S. Cavalry were sent to investigate and they didn't succeed either; there was even a burning house he shot his way out of.'*

'But Billy wasn't 'game' like Ned Kelly,' Polly insisted, 'and he wasn't a wonderful rider.' ¹⁶ *'No, but like Ned he was of Irish descent, although he never made the same poetic statements.'* Then I suggested, *'Perhaps Kelly was the only twentieth-century heroic figure. Sidney laughed, 'Old Ned was just a misplaced revolutionary with a gift of the gab 'And that's why you've painted him, on and off, for twenty years?' I painted him because he was a thinking underdog, or because he's part of the Australian scenery.'*¹⁷

While the Nolans returned to London in 1960, Sidney did secure a number of exhibitions in America including a solo exhibition at the Durlacher Brothers in New York. Shortly after the opening of *Sidney Nolan* (March–April 1962), the New York based magazine *Horizon* published a feature article on Nolan by the writer Alan Moorehead. In what reads as a stereotypical commentary of the male artist as hero, both Nolan and Kelly are described in terms of radical and expressive individualists. Kelly is presented as 'a brave and unrepentant misfit, as the avenger of injustice, as one man defying destiny, as the personification of the poet's idea that an hour of glorious life is worth an age without a name.'¹⁸ In the same vein Moorehead continues with:

His haunting, monolithic figure in the iron mask has the flames of hell upon it, but that slit for the eyes is wonderfully expressive of defiance: this is the crisis of the strong man in chaos, and once again the tragedy is

*beautiful. With his Kelly paintings Nolan began to reach up toward the full range of his special talent, the uninhibited expression of an emotion in paint.*¹⁹

While the Kelly paintings of 1959–60 are comparatively few in number, they mark an important transition point between the careful elegance of the mid-1950s series to the intensely expressive canvases of the mid-1960s. Nolan's inventiveness in the early 1960s also proved to be productive. In series such as *Kelly I–VI* (1962), the naked outlaw appears to dance across the canvas in a private and secluded performance, reminiscent of Indigenous Australian dance. In *Kelly and Armour* (1962), the first indication of the outlaw's vulnerability is revealed in a powerful rendering of a naked, convict-striped Kelly. Highlighting a clear distinction between the historic and symbolic outlaw, Kelly gazes at his armour lying discarded at his feet. This separation of identities presents the viewer with a series of intriguing questions concerning the construction and presentation of public and private personas. Such issues can be related not only to Kelly but also to Nolan, who faced similar issues of celebrity. Certainly the desire to divest oneself of a particular identity is, at the very least, suggested in this painting. Significantly, the stripes on Kelly's body might also be read as ritualistic body painting, as if the figure is exchanging his outlaw status for another, perhaps sacral identity. While the meaning of the image remains elusive, it is clear that the figure is depicted in a state of profound psychological transition.

1960s MORTALITY, MYTH AND MEMORY

Through his Kelly paintings of the mid to late 1960s Nolan considers the existential themes of mortality and defeat within the context of encroaching age. Kelly is no longer the defiant and youthful outlaw but a crestfallen, middle-aged fugitive, roaming the outback in a desultory and perpetual exile. As the real Ned Kelly died at the age of twenty-five, this older figure is clearly a fiction, and one which the artist used to expand the dimensions of the Kelly myth. According to Elwyn Lynn:

*Two kinds of Kelly, both quite different from the puppet-forms of 1946–7 and the sinewy survivor of the bleak outback of 1954–6, emerge in the latest period; in one he is the martyr in flames, consumed by a relentless fate like Rimbaud's; in the other he is the most wispy, wraith-like, vulnerable creature Nolan has painted.*²⁰

Produced in a period marked by the death of the artist's father, Nolan's mid-1960s Kellys reveal a nostalgia for the landscape of the artist's boyhood holidays, spent with his family around the Victorian township of Shepparton. The sweeping vistas of the nearby Goulburn River flow through the panels of *Riverbend* (1964–65), as a slow and deathly current. Like the bush that surrounds it, the river harbours both danger and the consuming threat of anonymity. Kelly's presence in *Riverbend*, and in many of the accompanying paintings, is persistently overshadowed by the harsh Australian environment. Often conceived in liquid swathes of umber and burnt sienna, these landscapes writhe with the primordial slipperiness of freshly-wetted clay or alternatively seem clogged with vegetative darkness. In creating these images Nolan recognised the latent oblivion of the Australian terrain, against which the figure of his hero is emphatically asserted. *I'm reluctant to drop the idea of a hero figure. If I lost this I would be discarding something very Australian. Without the hero you end up with anonymity.*²¹ In the face of the naked and crestfallen Kelly in works such as *Riverbank* (1964), Nolan's comments indicate a crucial and decisive tension. The heroic transformation, necessitated by a spectacular and youthful death, has been supplanted by a figure akin to that of Shakespeare's King Lear. In common with Lear, Kelly's drama is enacted outside the bounds of society, in the netherworld of personal reflection and the curmudgeonly musings of a vanquished hero. Here, nature is invoked as an all powerful and entropic animus. In *Riverbend*, the cloistered bushland belittles the battle between Kelly and his police pursuer, diminishing their drama to a footnote in the eternal wilderness. Nolan's mid-1960s Kelly images are, as in much of the artist's work, animated by overtones of significant personal experience. Like *Riverbend*, the nine-panelled *Glenrowan* (1966), focuses on the landscape surrounding the Goulburn River. Conceived as a homage to the artist's recently deceased father, the work was purchased by the Museum of Art, Carnegie Institute, Pittsburgh. Nolan remarked that: *It was done after my father's death and the prostrate figure of Kelly is a mourning figure, as it were, of my father. He's about fifteen feet lying down in the grass almost hidden, and behind him is a kind of Riverbend and a woman and a baby; I suppose my mother and myself off in the distance.*²² The zeitgeist of abstract expressionism is now cast in the hues of the Australian hinterland. According to Elwyn Lynn, Nolan was influenced by 'the loose, instantaneous, autonomous, swirling gestures of the abstract expressionists and with a way of looking that De Kooning calls "the slipping glimpse".'²³

De Kooning's concept, which alludes to the process of perception and to impressions gleaned from the periphery of awareness, had been of long-standing interest to Nolan, harking back to the first Kelly series.²⁴ Yet beyond these stylistic elements there is a profusion of conceptual and visual references, which extend the implications of the 'slipping glimpse', suggesting that Nolan continued to draw on multiple points of reference in the construction of his narrative images. In *Glenrowan* (1964), for example, the image of a seated Kelly consumed by the flames of battle is strongly reminiscent of a famous period photograph associated with the Vietnam War. Captured on film by press photographer Malcolm Browne only months before Nolan painted *Glenrowan*, the photograph *The self immolation of Thic Quang Doc* (1963), became a catalysing image for the anti-Vietnam war movement. While it is difficult to attest to the intent of Nolan's reference, it seems prescient that within a year of the painting being completed, Australia would also enter the Vietnam conflict and its own troops would likewise die in the flames of battle. During the 1960s commentary concerning Nolan's work expanded considerably. Yet, although the artist often referred to the wide range of preoccupations in his work, critics persistently described him as a conjuror of myth, history and landscape. In 1967 the September edition of the art magazine *Art and Australia* was devoted entirely to Nolan articles and coincided with his Art Gallery of New South Wales retrospective.²⁵

Writing in this special edition of *Art and Australia*, John Reed argued that Nolan's Kelly: *was not just an ordinary mortal but rather a figure of the Dreamtime, who strode through this world larger than life, performing superhuman feats and stirring in us a deep awareness of man's potential greatness and the tragedy of his eternal inadequacies.*²⁶

Challenging this position Geoffrey Dutton suggested 'it is time someone called [Nolan] an historian... an archaeologist of shallow diggings, of the merest brush of life against the eternity of background.'²⁷

While Nolan did focus on historical and mythical subjects, his significance in a global context derives from more than these reasons alone. Nolan, along with artists such as Arthur Boyd, were crucial in championing a style of painting that was steadfastly literary in nature, creating an important strand of Australian painting in the 1960s. This was a clear alternative to the formalist endeavours of painting on both sides of the Atlantic.²⁸ While his practice

was closer to British figuration it nonetheless distinguished itself as a culturally distinct endeavour because of its narrative basis.

For Nolan, the theoretical debates which drove a wedge between abstraction and figuration were both highly intellectualised and ultimately flawed.²⁹ The position that he occupied was exemplified clearly in his symbolic Kelly helmet. Despite his ready participation in promoting the mythic dimensions of his own work and public persona, the artist was equally adamant in his opposition to the directions of modern art, stating ‘I now find myself at variance with most western art.’³⁰ While this radical proclamation was largely ignored by his commentators, it is significant that Nolan was fervently committed to his own, arguably idiosyncratic, artistic position as embodied in the square-masked figure of Ned Kelly.

1970s DECONSTRUCTING NED

By the 1970s Nolan had achieved a degree of acclaim unmatched by any other Australian artist. The decade, however, would prove to be the most tumultuous of his life, marred not least of all by Cynthia’s tragic suicide in 1976. Works from the early 1970s reflect the artist’s preoccupation with the darker dimensions of the human psyche and at times Nolan’s imagery—both his paintings and his newly published poetry—displayed disturbing and vindictive tendencies.

While for the greater part of the decade Nolan’s output of Kelly imagery noticeably diminished, the works from this era are, however, some of the most confronting works in all his oeuvre. In the illustrated publication *The Darkening Ecliptic* (1974), and in various later Kelly paintings, the iconography includes group sex, auto-erotic strangulation, rape and Christian martyrdom. Even the more conventional works point to environmental and nuclear annihilation. Historically, criticism of Nolan has vacillated between genteel praise of his genius to condemnations of his prolific approach. Invariably commentators have tended to bypass the more challenging aspects of his work. This has amounted to a staving off of insight, for these elements cut to the heart of the artist’s darkly Romantic vision. In the light of their strategic logic it would be a mistake to dismiss the 1974 and 1979 Kellys as either technically or structurally flawed. As in past decades, series painting formed a ritual striving to enscript the artist’s symbolic universe. The rapidity of the works’ execution is the end product of automatist methodology and not, as some would have it, the endeavours of a

factory-line painter. The Kelly imagery in *The Darkening Ecliptic*, in which the outlaw enters a pantheon of swirling figures, ancient deities and a mysterious earth-mother, contrasts with the Kelly paintings of 1979, where he is conflated with the image of Christ crucified. Nolan's interest in both the pantheistic cults of ancient Europe and in Christian iconography is brought to bear to present Kelly as a figure of complex psychological layers. In 1973, Nolan's fascination with the tale of Oedipus gave rise to a further body of paintings, which would also influence his new Kelly imagery. These referents, of ancient earth-mother, Christ crucified and the tale of Oedipus, gave a psychoanalytical character to Nolan's paintings of the 1970s, which are characterised by passages of free associations and arcane personal symbolism. These images are also interspersed with figures from Nolan's other historical paintings, such as Eliza Fraser, who famously betrayed her convict rescuer. In *Petit Testament* (1974), which is illustrated in *The Darkening Ecliptic*, Kelly penetrates Eliza Fraser while hanging in the executioner's noose. The scene represents the first moments of martyrdom for only in death can the hero achieve immortality. Describing this painting Robert Melville suggests: *It is a marriage of the damned which elucidates the meeting of the two key figure in Nolan's mythology. Mrs Fraser becomes the bride of Ned Kelly after he has been hanged, and Kelly is given an enormous phallus to celebrate their union. Stiff and stark, they reign like gods in these recent drawings, almost majestic amidst the disorderly gathering of symbols, which seduce and mislead one another as they stream through the void. Nolan has created a new Last Judgement, a new Apocalypse.*³¹ In contrast, the 1979 Kelly paintings revisit the personal narratives of both artist and subject in terms of their complex psychological dynamics. This is especially significant in light of Nolan's admission that the first Kelly series contained an autobiographical subtext. Discussing the personal elements of the 1946–47 works with Elwyn Lynn, he explained: *Really the Kelly paintings are secretly about myself. You would be surprised if I told you. From 1945 to 1947 there were emotional and complicated events in my own life. It's an inner history of my own emotions, but I am not going to tell you about them.*³² This 'inner history' is pertinent to the interpretation of such works as *Masks I–X* 1979. These ten paintings present Kelly's square black helmet, upon which images are projected as if by the unconscious mind. Within the confines of the 'masks', a series of dramas involving a man and a woman unfold. Collectively, these images may be read as allusions to the themes and tensions of creativity and romance, which, as the artist suggests, underpinned the structure of the original Kelly series. Nolan's pictorial disclosure, however, is imbued with the vivid symbolism of free association aimed towards universalising the

narrative. Consequently, the unravelling of meaning in the 1979 series follows no rational progression. In Nolan's hands surrealism's disjunctive logic is attended by narrative precedents, which force the viewer to scour the collective memory if sense is to be made. In 1979 Nolan also produced paintings of Ned Kelly's mother and his sister Kate. In *Crucifix and armour* (1979), Ned's mother is depicted kneeling at the foot of the cross, highlighting the artist's vision of Kelly as a latter day martyr. Painted for the anniversary of Kelly's death and exhibited at the Rudy Komon Gallery in 1980, the entire series was completed in south-west Wales at the Ruthland, the home of Mary Perceval, (the sister of Arthur Boyd), whom Nolan had married in 1978. Surprisingly, only a handful of works from the 1979 series attracted buyers. Audiences were no doubt perplexed by the esoteric allusions of the new series, which had little to do with the original Kelly saga. One exception however was *Mask X* (1979), a savage portrayal of the famous *ménage a trois* between Sidney Nolan and the Reeds. Here the outlaw's horizontal mouth is replaced by the lover's vertical orifice. This 'vagina dentata' is a novel rendering of an archetypal symbol of fear and death. The painting is a direct reference to Nolan's *Paradise Garden* (1971), poem entitled *Return*. The composition of the painting is identical to the drawing which accompanies this verse: *The failed lover from Paris came drunk as drunk could be crawled into bed and then there were three. The pricks between the sheets were stiff as death but made discrete by morning tea.*³³ The original Kelly series' autobiographical subtext is now exposed as psychologically oppressive and descriptive of an ultimately unstable situation. Nolan's execution of this new body of work within a year of the original series being gifted to the National Gallery of Australia by John and Sunday Reed suggests a cathartic motivation. In contrast the ensuing 1980 series is devoid of malevolent intent, verging instead on the sentimental.³⁴

SIDNEY NOLAN — THE MAN BEHIND THE MASK?

Considering his life-long fascination with Kelly, one might have expected Nolan to pursue his subject into the 1980s. The decade in fact marked the beginning of Nolan's return to abstraction. His last serialisations of the Kelly saga in 1979 and 1980 seemed finally to have exorcised the outlaw's hold over the artist, leaving him free at last to indulge a long-standing interest in non-figurative composition. Yet even as he approached this poetic and ethereal vision, the Kelly imagery for which he was now so famous emerged in unexpected moments.

Dreamtime #31 (1989), for instance, is a spectral manifestation of the outlaw hovering as a colossal mythical giant. Painted as part of a series which focused on Aboriginal myths concerning the evolution of the earth, it is one of the few significant Kellys of the period, a depiction of the artist's totem spirit existing in the ether of primordial creation. Inevitably, Nolan's public image became synonymous with that of Ned Kelly. A mercurial figure, Nolan was never easy to pin down and, moreover, presented a host of 'masks' to the world, as suggested in the painting *Myself* (1988). In this iconic and iconoclastic image Kelly's silhouetted form is roughly spray painted over an expressive and satirical self-portrait in spectacles and conservative attire. As Andrew Sayers suggests, *Myself* is a 'summation of [Nolan's] public career as a famous Australian painter. It is also a response to the artist's critics (like Patrick White) who mocked the apparent incongruity of the successful artist wearing the persona of the notorious rebel.'³⁵ The irony of the painting, however, is plain to see, the artist having portrayed himself with a mocking and bemused smile. Sidney Nolan died in 1992, leaving one of the most extensive artistic legacies of any Australian artist. While many delight in Nolan's numerous Kelly images, for others, the repetitive strain developed into little more than a hackneyed cliché. Yet when Nolan first painted the Kelly saga there were many who still felt the story did little to serve Australia in the long term. Not only did Nolan champion the mythic dimensions of Australia's colonial past; he created a symbolic image that is uniquely bound to the identity of the mysterious outlaw. In his successive serialisations Nolan portrayed the Kelly legend through a range of cultural and psychological paradigms. Kelly became a folk hero, a metaphor for modern warfare and a tragic existential wanderer; he manifested as a symbolic entity at one with the deities of ancient Europe or comparable to a Christian martyr. Through pursuing Kelly, Nolan created a powerful and indelible mythic vision. In doing so, he ensured a lasting place for Ned Kelly in the national psyche and gave rise to some of the most memorable images in Australian art.

Damian Smith

2006

Endnotes

1/ The complex and intimate relationship that evolved between Nolan and the Reeds commenced in 1938 and culminated in the artist's unhappy departure from Heide in 1947, shortly after the completion of the first Kelly series. Although speculation has raged over the exact details of the relationship, scant documentary evidence remains with which to build a clear picture of the life shared by Nolan and the Reeds. While the intensity of the connection between Sidney Nolan and Sunday Reed is evident in Nolan's letters to Sunday, Sunday on the other hand destroyed her letters to Sidney. With the exception of the vitriolic poems penned by Nolan in *Paradise Garden*, 1971, the artist remained evasive about the association.

2/ As the first Kelly series has been documented on numerous occasions, this project aims to extend the discourse on Nolan's ongoing preoccupation with Kelly. For a comprehensive analysis of the first Kelly series see Warwick Reeder (ed.), *The Ned Kelly Paintings: Nolan at Heide 1946–47*, exh. cat., Museum of Modern Art at Heide, Melbourne, 11 March – 18 May 1997.

3/ T G Rosenthal, *Sidney Nolan*, Thames and Hudson, London, 2002, p. 98.

4/ Sidney Nolan letter to Albert Tucker, Sydney, September 1952. Albert Tucker papers, Australian Manuscripts Collection, State Library of Victoria, MS 13373, box 2, folder A.

5/ See *The Redfern Gallery presents Sidney Nolan: Paintings, Drawings*, exh. cat., Redfern Gallery, London, 3–28 May 1955, no. 17.

6/ David Sylvester, *The Listener*, London, 12 May 1955.

7/ Colin MacInnes, 'Sidney Nolan and the Kelly Myth', *Encounter*, December 1955, p. 62.

8/ For example *Kelly* (1954–55), *Death of Constable Scanlon* (1954) and *The disguise* (1955).

9/ 'Sidney Nolan: Q & A', *The Studio*, London, October 1960, p. 130.

10/ Peter Fuller, 'Sidney Nolan and The Decline of the West', *Modern Painters*, vol. 1, no. 2, Summer 1988, p. 41.

11/ Stanley Spencer, 'Speaking with Sidney Nolan: The Australian Heroic Dream', *Studio International*, no. 168, 1964, p. 207.

12/ This painting was first exhibited at the Whitechapel Art Gallery, London, in 1957 as *Figure and Bird*. It was later reproduced as *Hungary* in Kenneth Clark, Colin MacInnes and Bryan Robertson, *Sidney Nolan*, Thames and Hudson, London, 1961. Inscribed verso: □olan Nov 12th 1956 / Hungary.

13/ Sidney Nolan in New York, 1958, quoted in Jane Clark, *Sidney Nolan: Landscapes and Legends: A Retrospective Exhibition 1937–1987*, exh. cat., International Cultural Corporation of Australia Ltd., 1987, p. 115.

14/ These works include *Kelly (with Cross)* (1959), *Kelly* (1959), *Kelly at Glenrowan* (1959–60), *Kelly in Swamp* (1960), *Ned Kelly and Landscape* (1960), *Kelly* (1960).

15/ Cynthia Nolan, *Open Negative*, Macmillan, London, 1967, p. 70.

16/ Polly was the name Cynthia used for her daughter Jinx throughout her numerous published memoirs.

17/ Cynthia Nolan, op. cit., p. 70.

18/ Alan Moorehead, 'Artist from the Outback', *Horizon*, vol. 5, no. 1, New York, September 1962, p. 100.

19/ *ibid.*

20/ Sidney Nolan, quoted in Elwyn Lynn, *Myth and Imagery: Sidney Nolan*, Macmillan, London, 1967, p. 46.

21/ Stanley Spencer, *op. cit.*, p. 208.

22/ Quoted in Elwyn Lynn and Sidney Nolan, *Nolan Australia*, Bay Books, Sydney, 1979, p. 150.

23/ Elwyn Lynn, *Myth and Imagery: Sidney Nolan*, *op. cit.*, p. 43.

24/ According to Albert Tucker, Nolan told him that *The slip* (1947), which is included in the original Kelly series and depicts a horse falling from a precipice, was inspired by an experience where he 'glimpsed some jockeys exercising their horses on the beach near Brighton when he was a passenger in a car. One of the horses was rolling on its back in the sand, kicking its legs in the air.' Quoted in Warwick Reeder, *op. cit.*, p. 11. For Nolan, these fleeting impressions would continue to inform his painting, inspiring many of his more memorable images.

25/ Hal Missingham, *Sidney Nolan Retrospective Exhibition: Paintings from 1937–1967*, exh. cat., Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, 13 September–29 October 1967.

26/ John Reed, 'Nolan's Kelly Paintings', *Art and Australia*, vol. 5, no. 2, September 1967, p. 446.

27/ Geoffrey Dutton, 'Sidney Nolan's Burke and Wills Series', *Art and Australia*, vol. 5, no. 2, September 1967, p. 459.

28/ The notion of an Australian style had for many years been a major preoccupation for Nolan. In a letter to Albert Tucker, dated 5 April 1954, Nolan wrote: 'What I am becoming interested in is the concept of an Australian style as against an Australian subject matter. This is the concept we must sell to Europe.' Albert Tucker papers, State Library of Victoria, *op. cit.*

29/ Discussing his views on abstraction and figuration in an interview with Peter Fuller, Nolan commented: 'I just feel I'm trying to thread my way through this narrow gap which I can see in this century between these two opposing forces which stand in a highly theoretical and false dichotomy.' Peter Fuller, *op. cit.*, p. 40.

30 / Stanley Spencer, *op. cit.* p. 209.

31/ Robert Melville, 'Foreword' in Elwyn Lynn, Robert Melville and Sidney Nolan, *The Darkening Ecliptic*, R Alistair McAlpine Publishing Ltd., London, 1974, p. 5.

32/ Quoted in Elwyn Lynn, James Mollison and Sidney Nolan, *Sidney Nolan's Ned Kelly*, exh. cat., Australian National Gallery, Canberra, 1989, p. 8.

33/ Sidney Nolan, *Paradise Garden*, R Alistair McAlpine Publishing Ltd., 1971, p. 57.

34/ For Elwyn Lynn the 1980s Kellys contain 'the most luscious nuances of pinks and yellows and arrays of delicate and cunning shapes... These nuances and subtle accumulations of forms are intensely lyrical, effervescent and liquescent.' Unsurprisingly these works, with their delicate colours and dew-eyed Kelly continue to be popular with collectors. Elwyn Lynn, untitled draft essay, 12 February 1981, records of Rudy Komon Gallery, National Library of Australia, Canberra, MS 8327, series 2, box 20, by permission of the National Library of Australia.

35/ Andrew Sayers, *Sidney Nolan Heads*, exh. cat., National Portrait Gallery, Canberra, 2001, p. 8

