

MARGARET PRESTON

Damian Smith

Deborah Edwards
(With Rose Peel, Denise Mimmocchi et al.)
MARGARET PRESTON
AGNSW, 300pp, CD Rom

Roger Butler
THE PRINTS OF MARGARET PRESTON
NGA, 373pp

There is something immensely satisfying about a work that is so ambitiously comprehensive as Deborah Edwards' *Margaret Preston* monograph published by the Art Gallery of New South Wales to accompany its current retrospective on this pre-eminent Australian modernist.

From the outset we are introduced to Preston's perennial capacity for stimulating not only debate but also downright factionalism. The introductory chapter takes the form of multiple quotes, leaving no doubt that Preston was, and continues to ignite heated debate over issues surrounding an authentic Australian vision.

At first glance, the voice of this outspoken and much published artist appears overshadowed by the plethora of commentators distributed throughout the text (no less than sixteen writers contributed to this volume). Yet it is this mix of divergent opinions that may well provide the book with a greater longevity, highlighting as it does, the partisan responses that Preston's work still manages to engender.

Edwards presents an intellectualised account of Preston's art and in doing so highlights the extent of the artist's polemical discipline. This may come as a shock to those who would see Preston as a nana of Australian art, quietly attending to her lovely floral arrangements. Instead Preston's sustained rendering of native flora through the combined filters of reductive modernism, Japanese linearity and Aboriginal art is analysed with precision. One comes away with a realisation that Preston was a true pioneer whose program for a national art remains vitally relevant to contemporary cultural debates.

For all of Preston's high-minded ambitions, it is her engagement with Aboriginal art that remains decidedly contentious. The monograph addresses this in part through the inclusion of texts by a range of contending writers and curators. Not least of all

Aboriginal curator Hetti Perkins, who voices a strident critique of Preston's appropriations of Aboriginal art, stating, "To Aboriginal eyes it reads as a scrambled orthography of vaguely familiar words, or a discordant symphony where the notes don't ring quite true. Preston's passionate attempts, while well intentioned, were doomed to fail ultimately because they are meaningless to Aboriginal people – not unlike the contemporaneous government policy of assimilation."

In contrast Edwards emphasises that while Preston was indeed an appropriator of aboriginal art, she was nonetheless an appropriator of a most sophisticated kind. Preston's sophisticated borrowing is especially effective in her landscapes of the 1940s, in which the colours and forms of Aboriginal art flow ever so subtly into Preston's technical brilliance.

With similar élan Edwards is quick to address the issue of Preston's self-promotional tactics. It is for this reason perhaps that Edwards has been less prepared, as others have tended to in the past, to base her analysis on the artist's self motivated claims. Through focusing instead on Preston's prodigious body of work and on the factual realities of her career, Edwards has succeeded in presenting a most provocative account of the artist's contribution to both Australian modernism and its lasting effect on notions of Australian image and identity.

Edwards' observation that 'Preston's tendency to simplistic public polemics obscured her serious methodological program' embodies much of the author's *modus operandi*. Yet, while Preston published numerous articles on a range of arts related topics, reference to her writing is here tightly controlled by Edwards. This adds strengths to Edwards' thesis; however a more comprehensive account of Preston's practice would have been achieved if at least some of this material had been included at length.

The CD Rom, which accompanies the book, would have been an ideal means of presenting Preston's writing. Yet despite this omission the inclusion of the CD Rom has enabled the Art Gallery of New South Wales to produce a thorough catalogue *raisonne* of paintings, ceramics and monotypes. Presented in a format that is at once accessible and comprehensive, it provides an excellent quick reference for Preston scholarship.

The catalogue is well supported by a comprehensive overview of the developments of the artist's career, from her early lessons as a China painter to her life as a student abroad to the later years as a prominent figure on Australia's artistic scene. Preston emerges from the first as a talented artist with abundant technical skill. Many of the early still lives are compelling, if somewhat derivative of European prototypes. From here a detailed

account is given of the artist's interest in 'the decorative', a term which nowadays is perhaps too easily misunderstood. For Preston the decorative was aligned with both progressive modernism and with a generalised democratisation of the arts. The formulation of the decorative as fundamental to surface and hence to modernity, privileged design over subject. During her years in Paris and Munich (1904-06) Preston was exposed to a wide range of contemporary practices and it appears that from this period on the artist progressed ever closer to a practice of pure painting.

By the late 1920's Preston is at the height of her artistic powers. In works such as *Western Australian Gum Blossom*, 1928 her observational engagement is profoundly alert, rendering the complex forms of gum leaves capped by the luminous presence of vivid native blossoms. Her compositional skills are likewise thoroughly refined, combining the simplicity of Japanese design principals and the reductive measures of European abstraction. In *Implement Blue*, 1927 (a work that draws instant comparison with Olive Cotton's *Teacup Ballet*, 1935) the artist has reduced her palette to the bare necessities. The forms are determined by strongly contrasted tones and angular intersections while all hint of superfluous detail is emphatically absent.

An exploration of Preston's techniques and colour theories is presented by Rose Peel in her chapter 'Drawing Connections'. This includes details of Preston's colour charts which the artist aligned with musical scales. Peel's text provides an added perspective to the reading of Preston's art. For instance setting it in context with a period interest in correspondence between colour and music. Seemingly however, Preston was not in the throws of synaesthesia, rather envisaging music as akin to science. By extension colour could be controlled by the rationalising effects of modernity and returned anew to the service of art.

This well researched and insightful volume represents the kind of scholarship that is much needed in Australia in the under nourished field of Modernist research. It makes a real contribution to its field and is a must read for anyone interested in this formative period of Australian art.

In comparison Roger Butler's catalogue *The Prints of Margaret Preston: A Catalogue Raisonne*, which focuses wholly on Preston's practice as a printmaker is a richly satisfying survey that highlights the artist's technical achievements across a range of graphic mediums. The catalogue is the National Gallery of Australia's expanded second edition of its original 1987 publication and includes a number of additional works not included in the first edition. Disappointingly, the catalogue illustrations lack the luminosity of the

original artworks, which greatly diminishes the viewing experience. This is also compounded by the distracting layout which somewhat shifts attention when one wishes to study the works. Nonetheless it makes a handsome companion to the AGNSW monograph especially as a comprehensive survey of the artist's prints is not included in the AGNSW publication.

Butler presents an informative account of Preston's career, while devoting a second chapter to the importance of craft throughout the artist's practice. Butler points out that craft remained a guiding principle for Preston, a discipline which reinvigorated her practice at every turn.

Clearly it is through examining the artist's prints that one is more likely to be surprised by the visual rather than conceptual inventiveness of the artist, for it is through the medium of printing that Preston sojourned through a greater variety of stylistic codes. Series works such as the diminutive *Women's sport*, 1934, are figures freshly conceived in a constructivist manner while *Mask 1 & 2*, c.1928 appear as surprising pre-cursors to Howard Arkley's Zappo heads. Stencilling was another medium favoured by Preston, marking her strongest foray into abstraction based on Aboriginal designs.

The oft held view that Preston's later work is somewhat diminished in quality is largely dismissed in light of the artist's delicately modulated monoprints. Better known for the poised angularity of her floral woodblock prints; one can also compare the suffused light of Preston's colour monotypes. Here the softness of her brush strokes conveys the hazy environs of a bush swamp or a fire filled night sky. The graphic punch subsides as mood invades these landscapes, conjuring gravitas in damp and brooding undergrowth.

Margaret Preston should be remembered as an artist of rigorous standards equipped with a dynamic approach to painting, printmaking and design. Preston was a tenaciously dedicated professional who communicated her ideas with utmost conviction throughout a career of some sixty-five years. Her quest for a uniquely Australian idiom marks her as a pioneer in Australian art. Significantly her radical synthesis of European, Asian and Aboriginal styles predates the emergence of contemporary colonial discourse and should be seen in the context of both her outspoken belief in Indigenous art forms and her quest for a national style. Issues addressed by Preston still persist today, appearing in the work of contemporary artists such as Immants Tillers, Tim Johnson and Gordon Bennett to name a few. Her language however is one of nuance, unfolding like the blooms she so persistently recorded. If for no other reason Preston will remain forever an artist who will be perennially rediscovered by subsequent generations.