

The Orchid and the Painter

- the unique art of Arthur Boyd
(1920-1999)

by Mike Leggett

Arthur Boyd grew up in Victoria in the 1920s and 1930s. One of the extensive Boyd family of painters, ceramicists, architects, writers and musicians; there were few areas of creative endeavour in which they have not lead or at least participated.

He found his fortune in England where he lived from the early 1960s onwards. His work sold so well that fourteen years later he was able to add to his property portfolio, a farmstead on the Shoalhaven River. A prolific painter, drawer,

printer and ceramicist, he and his wife Yvonne relaxed only when they made their regular pilgrimages to the Shoalhaven, travelling by sea in both directions, to and from Britain.

The Orchid and the Painter, is about the references made in many of Arthur's paintings, etchings and drawings to the orchids he encountered in and around his Bundanon Homestead on the Shoalhaven River, west of Nowra, New South Wales.

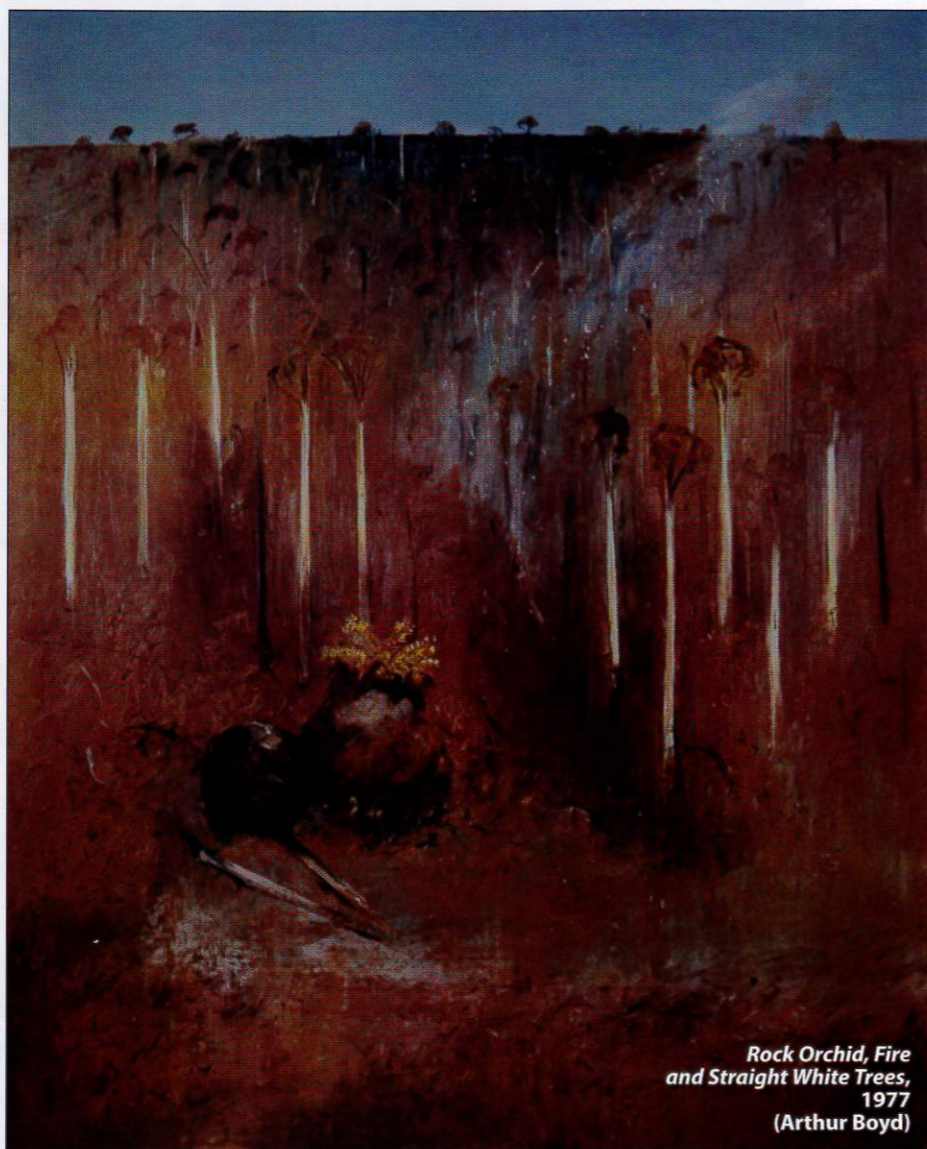


Dendrobium speciosum
- the Sydney Rock Orchid,
the inspiration of many of
Arthur Boyd's paintings
(photo: DPB)

Painting #1: Arthur Boyd, Rock Orchid, Fire and Straight White Trees

The orchid in Australia has been recorded and documented by many botanical artists. The earliest and most celebrated was the Austrian, Ferdinand Bauer, followed by many from R.D. FitzGerald to W.H. Nicholls and J.J. Riley. A popular subject amongst painters for at least two centuries, and for photographers too. But for a shorter time and daresay, less application of the artistic imagination. Martin Johnson Heade, a 19th Century American painter associated with artists of the Hudson River School is perhaps best known for his exotic *Cattleya Orchid and Three Hummingbirds*. However, there was an Australian painter, known for his erotic content, for whom the orchid was more than a complex intertwining of shapes, colours and textures, who depicted the plant as talisman, a *leitmotif*, an ancient presence acting as harbinger to the events of the contemporary world.

Enscenced by the River, he would often work in the landscape, *en plein air*, responding with paint and gesture to what he saw in front of him. The Sydney Rock Orchid (*Dendrobium speciosum*) featured very often in his work, peripherally in some works, or in *Rock Orchid, Fire and Straight White Trees*, painted in 1977 at centre stage. This is not a botanical record of the species nor even a portrait but a rendition of this particular specimen plant in its natural setting, on a rock surrounded by *Eucalyptus maculata*, the Spotted Gums characteristic of the South Coast of New South Wales. The shades of yellow and white are deftly applied, the leaves and pseudobulbs simply shadowy marks atop the contrasting greys and browns of the rock.



Rock Orchid, Fire and Straight White Trees, 1977 (Arthur Boyd)

Arthur's approach to paint was not as an Impressionist, though his management of oils was informed by the workings of painters from the previous 100 years. The overall technique was far more physical, almost Expressionist, working rapidly and boldly, layering colour to maintain a density of nuance, helping to conjure the sense of bush in depth across a sloping terrain of blacks, browns and greys. One of the painters whose work he admired was the European Oskar Kokoschka, a master of this approach.

Handling paint since his teens, making pictures was second nature to him. Essential to understanding these statements and what lies behind the surface of his paintings are the ideas expressed. He once observed, "*Rock Orchids grow in profusion on the cliffs at Bundanon, and like all Australian plants which seem to thrive on being tortured, they proliferate when a fire has been through the bush. I put the two ideas together, but I also see the orchid, one of the most spectacular plants found in the bush, as a symbol of regeneration.*"

Painting #2: Arthur Boyd, Narcissus Suite - The Orchid on the Rock, 1983, etching and aquatint. Bundanon Trust Collection.

Throughout his career, Boyd had periods of obsession with certain figurative beings, cropping up in various guises at different times. An instance is in the *Bride* series; or in the classical, the *Narcissus* series. A book he made with the poet Peter Porter again refers to the rock orchid:

*The orchid rears its dozen necks
On a cushion of self: not scent
But a colourless colour, so intense
It eats the light, brings us up close.*

He employed the ancient Greek fable of the young man who is captured by the sight of his own image. As a way of commenting on the vanity and foolishness of youth, living life on the edge of a catastrophe, which within Boyd's obsession was the imminent danger of nuclear war, something which again, unexpectedly reared an ugly head recently.

In this context we can speculate why it was Boyd who used the image of the Rock Orchid in so many settings. He was a man of few words but immensely interested in science and the revelations scientists were making year on year. Though he did not make pictures with the eye of a scientist, his mind engaged with their findings. Without doubt he would have known the family Orchidaceae is one of the oldest of the flowering plants. Its presence establishes in the picture an image of longevity as well as great beauty, contrasting the short-sighted ambitions of humans with the timelessness of the natural world.

When in 1993 he left Bundanon's two properties and nearly 3000 acres (over 1200 hectares) of bush to the nation he emphasised the importance of knowledge. The practice of research he demonstrated throughout his life, constantly reading and innovating technique. He stipulated that the premises he was gifting should be made available to artists and scientists in residence, his intention clearly being to encourage the two cultures to work more closely together, rather than apart.

The Bundanon Trust (www.bundanon.com.au) for a decade has encouraged this with an annual event Siteworks, in September, the prime rock orchid flowering season. But besides running residential accommodation for artists, scientists and schools, the property is open to the public on



The Orchid on the Rock, 1983 (Arthur Boyd)

Sundays throughout the year. The extensive walking tracks enable visitors to encounter the places Arthur painted and at different times of the year, see the orchids he would have known. Thumbnail and Streaked orchids (*Dockrillia linguiformis* and *Dockrillia striolata*) often appear at the periphery of some walks, a variety of Greenhood too, many of which can be found quite near to the homestead of Bundanon (*Pterostylis nutans*, *Pterostylis grandiflora*, *Pterostylis erecta*, *Pterostylis curta*), and of course the epiphytic grass-like *Cymbidium suave*. Arthur Boyd was announced as "Australian of the Year" in 1995.

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**Painting #3: Arthur Boyd,
Nodding Green Hood,
1997, oil on canvas.
Bundanon Trust Collection.**

One of the last works he made shortly before he died in 1999, known as the Nodding Green Hood, can be seen in the studio preserved at the site and just as he left it. A black bird with red eye is hanging sideways in a tree in the upper right corner. A grassy shrub is in the centre with thick red paint used for this and also the signature "Arthur Boyd". The background is grey and reds with a horizontal horizon line and blue sky. Various species of greenhoods are encountered on one of the bush walks that lead to the Amphitheatre. It was painted in 1997, yet strangely dated 1999.



Nodding Green Hood,
1997
(Arthur Boyd)



Pterostylis rufa
- this is the actual
species (also known as
Oligochaetochilus rufus)
that Boyd painted as the
"nodding green hood"
(photo: DPB)



Pterostylis nutans
- the real Nodding Greenhood,
Shoalhaven River
(photo: Mike Leggett)



Pterostylis grandiflora
- the Cobra Greenhood
(photo: Jolande Beemster)

**Painting #4: Arthur Boyd,
The Amphitheatre, 1993, oil on canvas. Bundanon Trust Collection.**

The Amphitheatre, an impressive collection of massive sandstone rocks at the edge of the escarpment, resplendent with the lithophyte Sydney Rock Orchids (*Dendrobium speciosum*), blooming in September and October. Note the overly large snake in the centre of the painting.



Amphitheatre and Orchids
- Bundanon, NSW
(photo from morselsandscrap
online blog) - this is the
same outcrop of rocks and
colonies of the lithophytic
Dendrobium speciosum that
Arthur Boyd painted

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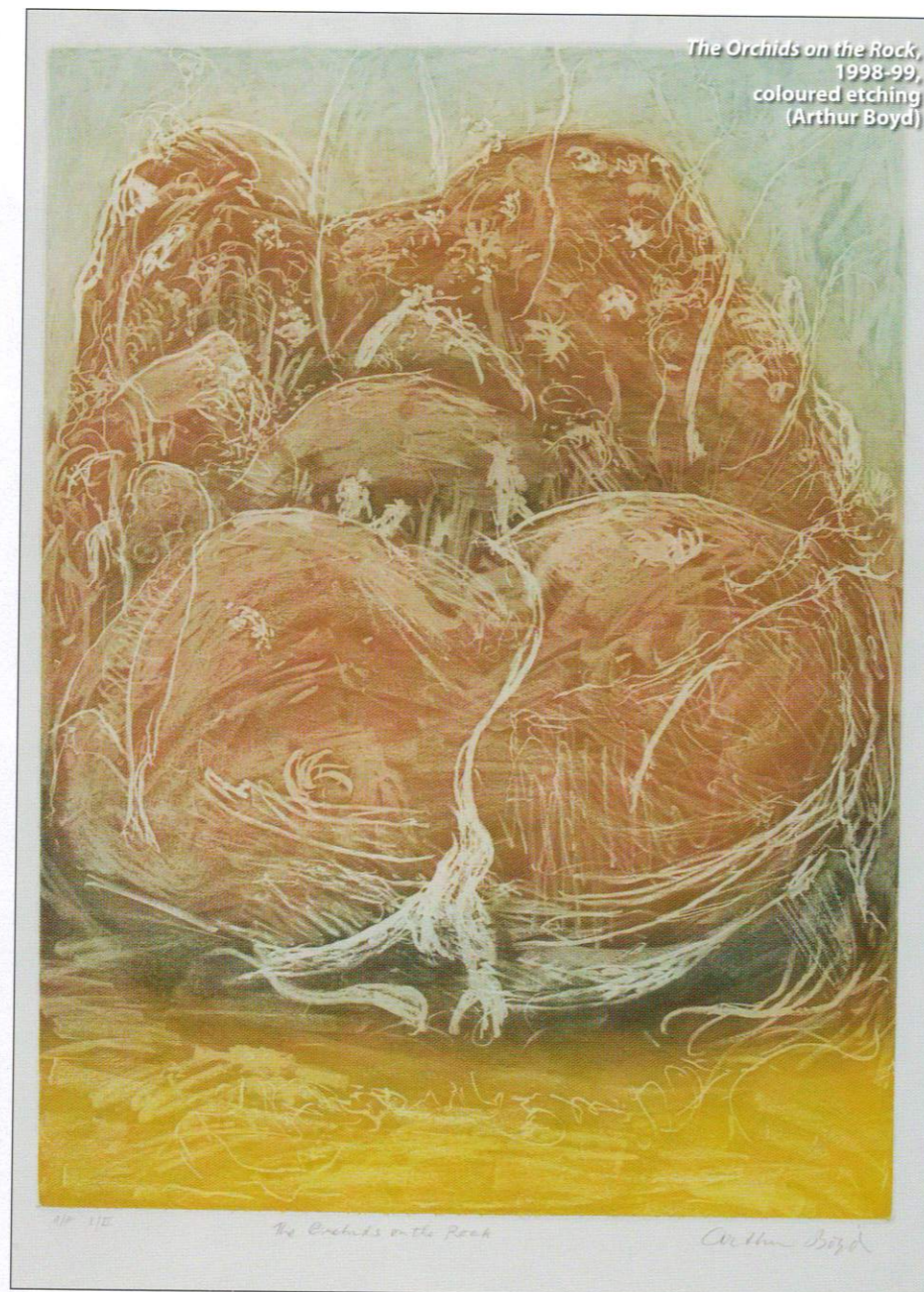
**The Amphitheatre,
1993
(Arthur Boyd)**

**Painting #5: Arthur Boyd,
The Orchids on the Rock,
1998-99, coloured etching.
Bundanon Trust Collection.**

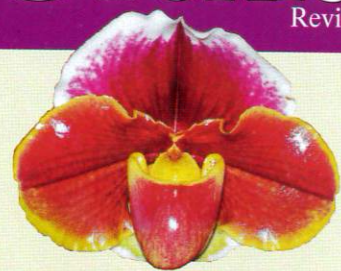
The Amphitheatre is also where a film was shot in 1993, with Arthur assisted by Yvonne and his assistant setting up a large canvas and preparing the paints for Arthur to work with knife and hands, over the course of the day. The painting can be seen in his studio at Bundanon. Later he made a coloured etching, the orchids are happily still in place. ■

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