

The Orchid and the Painter



Rock Orchid, Fire and Straight White Trees

The orchid has been recorded and documented in paint by many botanical artists. The earliest and most celebrated in Australia was the Austrian Ferdinand Bauer, followed by many from Fitzgerald to Riley and Banks. A popular subject also 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, an 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, though known for his erotic content, for whom the orchid was more than a complex intertwining of shapes, colours and textures, depicting the plant as talisman, a leit motif, an ancient presence acting as harbinger to the events of the contemporary world.

Arthur Boyd grew up in Victoria in the 1930s, one of the extensive Boyd family of painters, ceramicists, architects, writers and musicians; there were few areas of creative endeavour in which they had 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 ten years later he was able to add to his property portfolio, a farmstead on the Shoalhaven River in NSW. A prolific painter, drawer, printer and ceramicist, he and Yvonne relaxed only when they made the annual pilgrimage to the Shoalhaven, travelling by sea in both directions to and from Britain.

Ensnared by the River, he would often work in the landscape, en plein aire, responding with paint and gesture to what he saw in front of him. The Sydney Rock Orchid 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 NSW. 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. (See above)

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 Kokocshka, 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."



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; and the classical, in the Narcissus series. He employed the ancient Greek fable of the young man who flew too close to the sun 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 its ugly head in 2017.

Arthur Boyd, Narcissus Suite - The Orchid on the rock, 1983, etching and aquatint. Bundanon Trust Collection.

In this context we can speculate why it was Boyd 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 order orchidaceae at 92 million years is 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 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 for a decade has encouraged this with an annual event Siteworks, in September, the orchid season. But besides running residential accommodation for artists, scientists and schools, the property is open to the public on 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 *D. striolata*) often appear at the periphery of some works, a variety of Greenhood too, many of which can be found quite near to the homestead of Bundanon (*Pterostylis nutans*, *P. erecta*, *P. curta*), and of course the *Cymbidium suave*.



One of the last works he made shortly before he died in 1999, known as the Nodding Greenhood, can be seen in the studio preserved at the site and just as he left it. Greenhoods are encountered on one of the bush walks that leads to the Amphitheatre, an impressive collection of massive rocks at the edge of the escarpment, resplendent with the lithophyte Sydney Rock Orchids (*Thelychiton speciosus*) and the epiphyte variety (*Thelychiton epiphyticus*), both seen in September and October.



It was at that time in the same place a film was shot in the 1990s, 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. It too can be seen in the studio. Later he returned to the place to make a coloured etching, the orchids still in place.

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