Surrealism and Australia: towards a world history of Surrealism*

Rex Butler and A.D.S. Donaldson

There have been over the past few decades several art shows dedicated to global aspects of well-known art movements. World Impressionism, Feminism and Conceptualism have all had their turn at being anthologised. But there has not been to our knowledge a similar exhibition undertaken with regard to Surrealism. We attempt to write here the Australian entry for such an exhibition. However, before doing so, we might speak for a moment about the special place such a project would have because, if Surrealism can now be seen from a global perspective, it also like those other art movements casts a particular light upon this globalism. In some ways, we must try to think the fact that, if today Surrealism can be seen from a global perspective, the very notion of globalism is ‘surrealist’: not only an aspiration of the original movement (as globalism was also implied in Impressionism and Feminism), but itself a ‘surrealist’ idea.

Of course, Surrealism is famously – at least at the beginning – a movement strongly identified with a single figure, a single place and a single time: André Breton in Paris in 1924. Breton’s particular genius, we might say, was to take the post-War energies of Dada, which happened variously in Zurich, Hanover, Berlin and New York, and involved artists from many different countries (Belgium, Romania and Holland), and out of this dispersal constitute a coherent, centrally organised art movement. And he was able to keep its fire alight – for Surrealism was a particularly long-lived art movement – for some 30 years. But at the same time Surrealism – we might say due both to Breton’s own personal inclinations and the very nature of the movement – was also expansionist. With an internationalism already built into his Communism, Breton’s expatriatism in New York during the 1940s became crucial to that city’s artists. And equally important at the time was Breton’s engagement with Surrealism in Mexico, which found its ultimate expression in the International Surrealist Exhibition, held in Mexico City in 1940. And equally Breton’s famed collection of the art of the Sepik River in his flat at 42 rue Fontaine in Paris just after the War was also an attempt to take Surrealism around the world, in something like an extension of Picasso’s and others’ ‘primitivism’ some 30 years previously.

However, more than Breton’s own actions, the logic of Surrealism is already effectively globalist – and perhaps even more so than those other art movements. It is not

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about an outer landscape (like Impressionism) but about an inner landscape. It is not about a particular social subject (like Feminism) but about a universal unconscious subject. It attempts to put forward an argument not about art (like Conceptualism) but about life. And, more than this, once Surrealism is proposed, it is seen to be everywhere. That is, for all of Breton’s efforts to take Surrealism to Mexico, he found that once there Mexico was already surrealist. Japan too, which Breton never visited, not only had itself its own identified Surrealist movement, but this movement subsequently discovered that Japan was surrealist before Surrealism. More particularly, from the perspective we undertake here, following on from (but in a way reversing) the ‘primitivist’ logic of his interest in the art of the Sepik River, Breton discovers that Australian Indigenous art is already surreal, as he acknowledges in his Preface to Czech artist Karel Kupka’s Un art à l’état brut [The Dawn of Art: Painting and Sculpture of Australian Aborigines], a forerunner to Kupka’s later Doctoral thesis at the Sorbonne. Thus it was that Paddy Compass Namatbara’s large bark depicting two Maam figures ended up on the wall of Breton’s studio on the Left Bank after the War. (It is also something like this that can be seen in Adelaide-born Stella Bowen’s Le Masque (1930), painted in Paris deep into the failure of her marriage to Ford Maddox Ford, with its extraordinary split image of a white bourgeois woman holding up an African mask, her right hand with white bracelet and ring and her left hand with black bracelet and ring. Here too, if there is a similar ‘regressive’ impulse as in Breton, there is also something like the inevitable search by all avant-garde movements – even Bowen’s relatively mild version of Surrealism – for historical antecedents, the desire to attach themselves to something in the past.)

Figure 1 Stella Bowen, Le Masque (1930)
oil on wood panel, 35 x 26 cms
Courtesy Australian War Memorial, Canberra

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We do not immediately leap in this paper to the conclusion that Surrealism is already everywhere, but rather begin by tracing the first historical passage of Surrealism out of Paris. For as much as Surrealism looked inwards and backwards, it also looked outwards and forwards. Despite its leader’s attempts to contain it institutionally (its internal struggles were legendary, its expulsions innumerable), the movement ultimately went beyond Breton. Its popular heroes, Dalí, Magritte, Bataille and Artaud, all worked beyond his official patronage and in one way or another rejected his published manifestoes. And this is seen no more clearly – involving also Surrealism’s shift into another language – than in the 1936 *International Surrealist Exhibition*, held at the New Burlington Galleries in London, and involving some 400 works by 69 artists from 14 countries. For Breton himself, the show ‘marked the highest point in the graph of the influence of our movement’. 4 A high water mark, we might say, but also a shift in the tide, for if the show was the moment of Surrealism’s first outpouring beyond Paris, it was also the beginning of the loss of Breton’s own personal control over the movement. Although he, along with his close colleagues Paul Éluard and Man Ray, was on the French organising committee and gave a lecture at it, the show was in fact driven by the Englishmen Roland Penrose and Herbert Read. Earlier that year, Read had edited *Surrealism*, the first authoritative account of the movement (which included a reproduction of Christchurch-born Len Lye’s *Marks and Spencer in a Japanese Garden* (1930)). Indeed, three years before in 1933 he had written his *Art Now*, which already discussed Surrealism (and which included, at least in its first edition, a reproduction of the work of Sydney-born Roy de Maistre).

It is true that no Australians were involved in the original formulation of Surrealism. However, by the time of the *International Surrealist Exhibition* Read through his English-language popularisations had not only created the conditions for the reception of Surrealism in England but also opened more widely English modernism to the outside. As the art historian and aestetician Harold Osborne was later to write in his *Oxford Companion to Twentieth-Century Art*: ‘The show came upon the backwater of England’s 1930s like a bombshell’. 5 For many British artists, indeed, the *International Surrealist Exhibition* offered the first direct access to Surrealist works. Nonetheless, the show already included the work of the young English Surrealists Graham Sutherland, Cecil Collins, John Minton and the Birmingham group that included Conroy Maddox and John Melville, alongside the more established Giacometti, Arp, Klee, Miró, de Chirico, Dalí, Pierre Roy, Magritte, Ernst and Masson. And this selection demonstrates that by this time Surrealism could not be said to come from only one place and was outside of any single person’s prerogative to adjudicate upon it. 6

Remarkably, as well as having a crucial impact on Australian artists living in England, the show was also extensively reviewed and discussed in Australia under such headlines as ‘Painting the Subconscious’ (*West Australian*) and ‘Surrealism – Exploitation of

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the Dream World’ (Adelaide Advertiser). And, after this, the follow-up 1938 Surrealist show back in Paris produced such headlines as ‘Surrealism – Art or Nonsense’ (the Advertiser again), ‘Freak Art on Exhibition’ (Hobart Mercury) and, inspired by its signature work, Duchamp’s 1200 bags of coal suspended from the ceiling of the gallery, ‘Art Show in a Cellar’ (the Argus in Melbourne).

It could, however, be said that, even before Breton repackaged a number of existing cultural tendencies as Surrealism, artists from Australia and New Zealand were already working through many of the same sources as he was. By late 1922, Len Lye was copying by hand the entirety of Sigmund Freud’s Totem and Taboo at the Mitchell Library in Sydney, the same year he had moved to Australia. He had earlier come to Freud through his studies of certain ethnographic and anthropological texts held in the same Library. These studies of the Indigenous art of Australia and the Pacific would eventually lead Lye to the cel animation of his first movie Tusalava, which premiered in 1929 at the then recently formed London Film Society, with a now lost live score composed by his Sydney friend, the musician and composer Jack Elliott. Lye would later participate in the 1936 International Surrealist Exhibition, for which Penrose and Read selected a painting and two photographs. In fact, Lye’s influences caught up with him there because the show also included work by African, Maori and Aboriginal artists. This primitivism, whose prestige by the 1930s was inseparable from that of Surrealism, was to influence another Australasian artist with international connections, the New Zealander Frank Weitzel, who had studied in Los Angeles, New York and Munich before coming to Sydney. There he collaborated with Roy de Maistre on the 1929 Burdekin House Exhibition before leaving for London, where he came to know the British linocut artist Claude Flight and began to make boldly-edged images of ‘tribal’ masks and figures, showing them in the 1931 and 1932 Exhibitions of British Linocuts at the Redfern Gallery.

De Maistre himself left for London 1930, and almost immediately held an exhibition with his young friend Francis Bacon at 7 Queensberry Mews. He had painted works at Bacon’s studio and bought two canvases by him from the show. De Maistre’s influence on Bacon is clear, despite Bacon’s own subsequent attempts to distance himself from his sources.8 In 1934 de Maistre held his own first-person exhibition at the then leading Mayor Gallery, perhaps with the support of the emerging art historian and collector of Australian parentage Douglas Cooper. In that same year he opened his School of Contemporary Painting and Drawing with the German Martin Bloch, and the year before had had his work reproduced in Read’s Art Now. A few years later De Maistre would become the first love of Australian author Patrick White, whom he had met in interwar queer London, another Australian working at the time in a Surrealist idiom. The nexus between De Maistre, Bacon, White and Cooper is a little-recognised but nonetheless crucial encounter in Australian modernism, bringing together two Australian expatriates and two diasporic Australians.9

The other Australian present in London at the explosion of International Surrealism was Sydney-born James Cant. De Maistre had introduced him to the Mayor Gallery, where he first showed in 1935 in a group exhibition beside Ernst, Klee and De Chirico, and he was

7 Horricks, Len Lye, 48.
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subsequently invited to become a member of the London Surrealist Group. In 1936 he was awarded a subsidy by Kenneth Clark and Herbert Read, along with Bacon, Sutherland, Ivon Hitchens, Victor Passmore, John Piper and Julian Trevalyan, and together these artists held an exhibition at Thomas Agnew’s that same year. Together with his friend Geoff Graham and in response to an advertisement calling for volunteers for medical research, the two Australians experimented with mescalin. It was under this drug that Cant painted Merchants of Death (1938), the first art work done by an Australian artist under a stimulant other than caffeine, nicotine, opium and alcohol. In 1937 he was invited to participate in Surrealist Objects, which opened at midnight at the London Gallery, Penrose’s and E.L.T. Mesens’ important Anglophonic centre for Surrealism. In 1938 he participated in the large group exhibition Realism and Surrealism at the Guildhall, Gloucester, and in Collage, Papier, Photomontage at the Guggenheim Jeune in London.

Cant, however, was not the only Australian artist doing collage at this time. In her monumental Collage, the German art historian Herta Wescher writes in a margin note that the Australians Geoffrey Graham and Eric Smith, beside Lye and Cant, were doing collage in London in the 1930s – she probably knew of Graham and Smith from Surrealist Objects, where they showed alongside Nash, Mesens, Penrose, Trevalyan and Moore, and the American Lee Miller. Back in Australia Sidney Nolan was also making his first Max Ernst-style collages in Melbourne from 1938. And, of course, there is a whole history of Surrealist photography – photography that is said to be the Surrealist medium by such critics as Rosalind Krauss – as exemplified by Max Dupain, that runs throughout the 1930s in Australia. In 1939, the year of his departure for Australia with war approaching, Cant participated in the touring exhibition British Surrealist & Abstract Paintings – Graham was also in this exhibition – and was the subject of a spread in the Mesens-edited The London Bulletin, the main mouthpiece for Surrealism in England.

Cant, needless to say, was not the only Australian artist whose life was interrupted by the War. The Melbourne-born Peter Purves Smith was in New York to visit the World Fair when War was declared on 3 September 1939. Returning to London on board the same ship as Patrick White and intending to go on to Australia, he suddenly decided to join the British Army, in which he spent most of the next six years. Amongst the best known of his paintings of the period is his ghostly and desolate New York (1936), notable both for its ‘wasteland’ theme – a common Surrealist trope regarding the city – and its upright cleft sticks, undoubtedly drawing on Dalí’s paranoiac-critical method (we might recall such sticks from the end of Dalí and Bunuel’s Andalusian Dog, for instance).

Following his war service, Purves Smith returned to Australia in 1946 and began once again to paint. As reviews of the International Surrealist Exhibition already indicate, the Australia he came back to was not isolated and anti-modernist, as conventional accounts of Australian art would have it. By 1940 and the end of the tour of the Basil Burdett-curated Exhibition of French and British Modern Art, both the Australian public and artists there had

10 Herta Wescher, Collage, New York: Abrams, 1968, 246
12 See on this Geoffrey Blainey, The Tyranny of Distance: How Distance Shaped Australian History, Melbourne: Sun Books, 1996. J.F. Williams’ Quarantined Culture: Australians Relations to Modernism 1919-39, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996, is more ambivalent on this, at once pointing to instances of Australian connection to overseas (for example, the reproduction of Marinetti’s Futurist Manifesto in Australia newspapers at
had their first experience of Surrealism. They had seen the work of Wadsworth, Nash and Sutherland and Dalí, De Chirico and Ernst – Ernst had earlier painted the Australian expatriate musicologist Louise Hanson Dyer in his *Surrealist Portrait of Louise Hansen Dyer* (1933) – and the success of the exhibition had inspired the critic Lionel Lindsay to write to publisher Sydney Ure Smith that ‘The intrusion of mathematics is the greatest insult ever made to art. Abstract art! You might as well talk of an abstract fuck or an abstract glass of whiskey’.\(^\text{13}\)

But it was through the first exhibitions of the Contemporary Art Society that the Australian public had their first prolonged engagement with Surrealism. Formed by artists in Melbourne and then Sydney in reaction to the founding of the Menzies-backed Australian Academy of Art, the first annual CAS exhibitions were dominated by Surrealism. The inaugural 1939 show at the National Gallery of Victoria featured the work of Eric Thake, Sidney Nolan, Albert Tucker and James Gleeson. The second exhibition in 1940 in both Melbourne and Sydney featured Thake, Nolan, Gleeson, Max Ebert (the pseudonym of the

artist Herbert McClintock) and Joseph Tierney (the pseudonym of the artist and critic Bernard Smith). And the third show in 1941 continued the Surrealist pre-eminence. Many of the same artists exhibited (Cant, Nolan, Graham, McClintock, Oswald Hall), but now also Geoff and Dahl Collings, Loudon Sainthill and the unknown painter Benezra Robert and unknown sculptor Lyalla Benezra – we wonder if these were not pseudonyms too. The third show could still earn the headline ‘The Pictures that Startled Sydney’ in the *Sunday Telegraph*¹⁴ – but they had in fact been doing so for years. The important thing is that, in the absence of exhibition possibilities for advanced art in Australia, this repetition of names makes clear that these CAS Annuals were making possible the establishment of long-term artistic careers.

In this series of exhibitions, modern and contemporary art were effectively Surrealism. So when it was time for the old guard to flex its muscles, Howard Ashton, art critic for Sydney’s *Sunday Sun*, under the title ‘Should Artists Paint Spinach on a Moon of Purple Cheese?’, predictably found fault with the second CAS show.¹⁵ On the other hand, the Perth-born CAS regular Herbert McClintock, in his guise as Max Ebert, defended it strongly. Indeed, Gleeson, now writing as an art critic, sought to explain the movement to the public in the November 1940 edition of the journal *Art in Australia* in an essay entitled ‘What is Surrealism? (The same issue featured a reproduction of Tucker’s *Futile City*, another example of the genre of ‘wasteland cities’, following Purves Smith). In his essay, Gleeson speaks of the work of Ebert and Tucker, and writes that in his own work *Principles of the Rituals of Homicide* (1939) – it seems that he too had been reading Freud’s *Totem and Taboo* – he attempted to ‘express the universal struggle for the liberation of the individual will… to achieve the freedom of his will man must metaphorically murder the father’.¹⁶

The second CAS brought Tucker up from Melbourne during the show for a roundtable on Surrealism with Gleeson and Smith (as Tierney), both of whom were members of the Teachers’ Federation Art Society. At this meeting Surrealism went national, but the moment was short-lived, as the divisions between the various actors quickly became apparent. For his part, Smith was committed to a political Surrealism – and indeed soon after he would abandon painting to pursue a career as an art historian. In his autobiography *The Boy Adeodatus*, written in a strange third person, Smith remembered that ‘Gleeson was the only person in Sydney that Bernard had been able to find who was seriously interested in Surrealism. But not at all in politics. It was the intuitive unpolitical side of the movement that attracted him, Freud and Dalí’.¹⁷ In 1940 Smith joined the Teachers’ Branch of the Australian Communist Party and began to dream of killing his father, the first historian of Australian art William Moore. *The Boy Adeodatus* ends ominously with the author recounting that ‘he had seen the old man [Moore] as a harmless old man ploughing a field. He then saw two knives on the table. He threw one at the back of the old man as everything went dark’.

Around the same time in 1939 Max Ebert was holding his first one-person show in Perth, which included works like *Dawnbreakers* (1939), with its glowering and confrontational faces. This show was then reprised at the Macquarie Galleries in Sydney,

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¹⁴ ‘The Pictures that Startled Sydney’, *Sunday Telegraph*, 21 September 1941, 2.
¹⁵ Howard Ashton, ‘Should Artists Paint Spinach on a Moon of Purple Cheese?’, *Sunday Sun*, 6 October 1940 (Art Gallery of New South Wales Press Clippings Folder).
¹⁶ James Gleeson, ‘What is Surrealism?’, *Art in Australia*, November 1940, 30.
where he moved permanently the next year. In Sydney he lived in an apartment in a big city building where he used the roof as an open air studio, and was photographed there in *Pix* magazine not long after his arrival, painting on the ceiling, sitting on the chimney and creating in the cupboard. Like Smith, he would later abandon his Surrealism (and his pseudonym) in favour of a socially committed practice and became a founding member of the Studio of Realist Art, the exhibition and educational vehicle that saw itself as the ‘conscience of a nation’.

![Image of Herbert McClintock's painting](image_url)

**Figure 3** Herbert McClintock, *Dawnbreakers* (1939)  
oil on canvas, 50 x 75 cms  
courtesy Art Gallery of New South Wales

But the dispersion of Surrealism widened beyond Sydney and Melbourne. In Brisbane, Vincent Brown, having discovered Surrealism while at the Grosvenor School and the Slade from 1936 till 1939 – he would undoubtedly have seen the *International Surrealism* show – undertook the opposite journey to McClintock from Realism to Surrealism. In 1945 he held his second solo exhibition at the Canberra Hotel in Brisbane, in what has been described as ‘the first insistently modernist experience visited on [that city’s] public’. The Surrealism of his War years revealed Balinese influences beside the more conventional Chagall-like dreamscapes. In 1948, he returned to England, where he would stay for 29 years.

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18 Unattributed, ‘Dreams Inspire Australia’s Art’, *Pix* (Sydney), 28 September 1940, 7.
before returning finally to Brisbane, eventually settling down to a softer and more decorative version of his original style.

In Adelaide, one of the most prominent exponents of Surrealism and an important driver of the establishment of the Contemporary Art Society was Ivor Francis. In 1939 Francis had met the precocious 18 year-old Max Harris, soon to found the cultural journal Angry Penguins, its title indicative of its Surrealist leanings. Adelaide had always been an important centre for modernism in Australia, and with Surrealism, in Harris’ words, it managed to turn ‘nice Adelaide into angry Adelaide’.\(^\text{21}\) Francis painted his Daliesque Schizophrenia in 1943 after a period of dramatic change in his life. Recently returned from several years of teaching in South Australia’s isolated Eyre Peninsula, he first exhibited the work at the Royal South Australian Society of Artists’ Gallery (a true Surrealist mouthful) in Adelaide, alongside that of fellow Adelaide Surrealist Douglas Roberts. Francis wrote at the time of its purchase by the Art Gallery of South Australia: ‘Schizophrenia is a work symbolic of frustration... To the artist this [schizophrenia] was the malady of the world itself in 1943’.\(^\text{22}\)

In Melbourne, there was Eric Thake, who not only painted, but was also a graphic artist and photographer. From 1932 he belonged to the Melbourne Contemporary Group, and in 1939 became a founding member of the Contemporary Art Society. An early exponent of Surrealism in Australia, Thake shared the CAS prize in 1941 with James Gleeson for his work Archaeopteryx, his Magritte-like image of the hatching of a plane. His aerial imagery and precise line here reminds us of the Auckland-born Felix Kelly, in particular Kelly’s Christmas Card from 1939 (and by co-incidence Thake himself printed his own long-running series of Surrealist Christmas cards between 1941 and 1975). A Surrealist all his life, Thake worked in advertising from 1926 to 1956, designing stamps, murals, newspaper ads and billboards. His photograph Torn Posters of 1963 both reflects on his own professional work and looks at once back to French lettrism and forward to Pop.

In Melbourne also, the painter, art writer and activist Bernard Boles began his own excursions into Surrealism. Like Gleeson in Sydney and the lesser-known Percy Watson in Melbourne, Boles drew on the biomorphic marine imagery typical of Surrealism all around the world, as seen for example in the work of Wadsworth and Yves Tanguy. In 1949 Boles, having been rejected from the Victorian Artists’ Society, would tie two pictures to the fence outside the show and spend the ensuing two weeks sharing his views on art with passers-by. Later that year, he held a one-person exhibition on the launch Fairyland, which was moored near the Princes Bridge on the Yarra River in Melbourne. An early critic of our art schools, he advocated a model of art education exemplified by the experimental approach of the Chicago Institute of Design: ‘Let him explore the sensory collage of Schwitters, the shapes and experience of volumes from Arp and Hepworth, the divided flat rectilinears and colour-values of Mondrian, the constructions of Tatlin and Gabo, the mobiles of Calder and the virtual volumes of Maholy-Nagy...’\(^\text{23}\)

If all of this dispersal was dizzying, it is nothing compared to the forced movement of our wartime immigrants, some of whom were artists. The infamous SS Dunera, the brutal

\(^{21}\) Max Harris, ‘Introduction’ to Jane Hilton, Adelaide Angries: South Australian Painting of the 1940s, Adelaide: Art Gallery of South Australia, 1990, 11.


transport ship that brought some 2500 so-called illegal aliens from Britain, arrived in Sydney on 6 September 1940, after a terrible 57-day journey. Among the ship's passengers were Klaus Friedeberger, Erwin Fabian, Ludwig Hirschfeld Mack and Fred Lowen. It is hard not to see Friedeberger's and Fabian's subsequent work as a response to their ordeal, and from their experience a particular subcategory of Surrealism in Australia developed. Hirschfeld-Mack's Desolation (1941) is well known. Less well known but its equal is Berlin-born Friedeberger's Camp Dream (1943) and Berlin-born Erwin Fabian's Coffin (1941), and these internment camp works are an outstanding early example of the depiction of the homos sacer, that extra-judicial figure stripped of all legal rights. Also arriving in Australia in 1940 was the Austrian Vera Rudner, a little-known painter who worked from the early '40s until 1948, in which year she painted her scarifying Sacrilege, just months before she abandoned painting, haunted by her European experiences.

But against this Surrealism with its internationalism, Freudianism, internal landscapes and its emigrants and immigrants there was the use of Surrealism to express something said to be particularly Australian. The artists Sidney Nolan, Russell Drysdale, Albert Tucker, Donald Friend, Jeffrey Smart and Arthur Boyd all secreted Surrealism in their Australian landscapes. Eventually each of these artists would distance themselves from Surrealism and become central to the creation of a new nationalist iconography. It is these artists who will become emblematic of Smith’s Australian art, and in their insistence on an at once mythic and vernacular figuration stood beside him in his so-called defence of the image against what he saw as the overwhelming tide of international abstraction. This defence motivated the Antipodeans exhibition in 1959, as much as it did his Australian Painting three years later. Just as Smith disavowed his original Surrealism in favour of a local Realism, so the artists he supported increasingly saw themselves as uniquely Australian, even if they actually lived elsewhere.

We can see all of this in the celebrated and by now over-analysed Ern Malley ‘affair’. The mock poems concocted by anti-modernists Harold Stewart and James McAuley were of course imitative Surrealist collages, directed against Max Harris and his by then Heide-based magazine Angry Penguins. This episode is as well-known as it is because it has been used by art historians to argue for the inevitability of the Antipodeans, that is, Surrealism is seen as a mere precursor to the ‘rebellion’ of realism. The tale is also used in a cautionary manner by such polemicsists as Smith, who treat it as an example of what not to do, as an instance of a wrong turning in the development of Australian art. However, the artistic success and long-running influence of the actual poems – for all of the bad faith of their original composition – inadvertently reveals just what the Australianists were never able to do. They were ironically the best known things that Stewart and McAuley would ever write, and indeed they have been shown, against their creators’ own claims, to be carefully and deliberately constructed works of art.

Against this Australianism, the immediate post-War years saw an influx and rise of immigrant artists. As usual, New Zealanders were coming to the country and rising to prominence. In fact, it was in the late 1930s in Sydney that the Te Awamutu-born Adele Younghusband began her exploration of Surrealism. In 1947 Gordon Walters moved to

24 See Bernard Smith, Antipodeans exhibition catalogue, North Brighton: Spotlight Press, 1959, np
Sydney and started his own studies into the Indigenous cultures of the Pacific and Australia in the Mitchell Library, repeating the earlier trajectory of Len Lye. The same year the Riverton-born Gordon McAuslan also moved to Sydney, where he continued to develop the Surrealism he had begun in New Zealand, and like Lye and Walters carried on his studies of the Pacific cultures. Concerned with the living cultures around them, these New Zealand artists engaged with Indigenous art and society in a way no European-Australian artist with the exception of Margaret Preston had ever done. When the Timaru-born born Colin McCahon came to Australia in 1951, however, it was not an encounter with Indigenous art that he had but with the now elderly Mary Cockburn-Mercer, who gave him some lessons that were to be decisive to his future work. Familiar with Cubism from her time in Paris – she was said to have been at the famous dinner hosted by Picasso for Douanier Rousseau in 1908 and to have worked with André Lhote in the 1920s – her later work both betrays these roots and indicates her ongoing engagement with Surrealism. Her Birth of Venus (1941) is a perverse reimagining of Boucher’s equally perverse Triumph of Venus (1740), painted some 200 years before and undoubtedly a form of Surrealism avant la lettre (and they do not exactly appear to be angry penguins!). Finally, in London Auckland-born Felix Kelly first made his reputation with a three-person show with Lucien Freud and Julian Trevalyn at the Lefebvre Gallery in 1943, and this reputation was confirmed when in 1946 Herbert Read, who had bought a painting from the show, wrote the introduction to the book Felix Kelly, published by the London-based Falcon Press in 1946.

Figure 4 Mary Cockburn-Mercer, Birth of Venus (1941)
oil on canvas, 100 x 94 cms
courtesy Australian Art Auction Records
The striking Dunedin-born Rosaleen Norton had been in Sydney since 1925. At high school she was expelled for producing ‘depraved’ drawings of vampires, ghouls and werewolves, and she subsequently enrolled at the East Sydney Technical School under sculptor Rayner Hoff, who encouraged her ‘pagan’ creativity.\footnote{Neville Drury, ‘Rosaleen Norton’, Design and Art Australia Online (www.daao.org.au/bio/rosaleen-norton/biography/) (accessed 26 January 2012).} She first attracted controversy when she exhibited a series of sexually explicit drawings at the Harold White Library at the University of Melbourne in 1949. It led to a raid by the police and Norton being charged with obscenity. Many of her works were based on supposed trance encounters, induced by self-hypnosis, with archetypal beings, who she considered had their own independent existence (although they are all, in fact, disguised self-portraits). The Art of Rosaleen Norton was published in 1952 and led to the publisher being charged with producing an obscene publication, and the book was subsequently only released with its sexually explicit images blacked out. From the 1950s on, she became known as the ‘witch of King’s Cross’. She was falsely accused of holding black masses and engaging in ‘unnatural sexual acts’. Perhaps her most notable contribution to Australian culture was when Eugene Goosens, who was the first conductor of the Sydney Symphony Orchestra and a member of...
her occult group, was charged in March 1956 with importing ritual pornographic objects, charges that led to his deportation from Australia and his death not long after.

![Figure 6 Rosaleen Norton, The Séance (c. 1950) courtesy Neville Drury](image)

But by far the greater proportion of Australia’s immigrants after the War came from War-torn Europe. Ready-formed Surrealists Dušan and Vojtě Marek arrived from Prague in 1948, bringing with them a particularly Central European form of Surrealism steeped in cosmic fairytale and folklore, initially to Adelaide, Hobart and Sydney, and then to Port Moresby in Papua New Guinea. It is perhaps their presence in Adelaide, the first in a series of Central European immigrants who were make that city their home, that allows us to see their work as a forerunner to a style that curator Daniel Thomas would later dub ‘Slavic space-age Adelaide’. Indeed, not long after his arrival in Port Moresby, Dušan Marek held his *Surrealist Exhibition* there, another important milestone in the world-wide dispersion of Surrealism (although, of course, by this time Papua New Guinea was already hanging above the hearth of Surrealism in Breton’s flat).

We might finish our entry here by returning to Europe. While the years after the War saw an influx of migrants, it also saw an outflow as Australian artists began once again to re-engage with Europe. In London, Gleeson met the sculptor Robert Klippel at the studio complex known as the Abbey, and together at the invitation of Mesens they held a joint exhibition at the London Gallery in 1948. This collaboration was important for them both. The painted wood figure *Madame Sophie Sosostris*, its title derived from a character from T.S. Eliot’s *The Wasteland*, which was the centrepiece of the show, brought together both Gleeson’s painting and Klippel’s sculpture. For his part, Gleeson returned to Australia and became an art critic and our best-known Surrealist. His work from the 1970s, a more erotic

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28 Daniel Thomas, ‘Slavic Space-Age’ (unknown source)
reprise of his earlier, reminds us as much as anything of a queer version of the American painter of soft-core female nudes Mel Ramos. For his part, Klippel moved to Paris after the show, where he warmed himself by the embers of Breton’s official Surrealism and where he held his first one-person exhibition at Nina Dausette’s La Dragonne. Slowly sinking in la ville de lumière, the movement would not last much longer in Australia. Its final resting place, at least in the official histories of art in this country, would be the Antipodeans.

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These few pages would constitute a possible Australian (or even Australasian) contribution to a show of world Surrealism. But they would not constitute any kind of Australian Surrealism, as Smith and those who followed him have desired. Nor would they constitute a Surrealism in Australia, as curator Christopher Chapman once proposed in a pioneering exhibition of that title. Rather, we might speak of what we have done as an essay on Surrealism and Australia, the two terms lying next to each other, to use a well-worn phrase, like an umbrella and a sewing machine on an operating table. Or we might even say that what we have pointed to is an UnAustralian Surrealism: the fact that to consider the relationship between Surrealism and Australia is to make clear that we never had an identifiable Australian art, that Australian art was always global, never simply existed within national boundaries but was always part of the world.

And this is what the Surrealists always understood. It was clear as early as 1929 when the Surrealist map of the world was published in an issue of the Belgian periodical

Variétés devoted to Surrealism. There, along with the disappearance of America and its replacement by Mexico, is the recognition that Australia is just another island in the Pacific, part of a wider Oceanic flow that has always existed. In the Surrealist map, boundaries waver, the equator is not a straight line separating North and South and the Pacific Ocean is the centre of the world. It was a point already made by Matisse in his Oceania in 1946 after his time in Tahiti; but Matisse was only following Gauguin’s trips to the same island, and to Sydney, Melbourne and Auckland, travels that led to the incorporation of Javanese and Polynesian art directly into his Parisian studio at 6 rue Vercingètorix in the early 1890s. And Gauguin’s installation reminds us of Adelaide artist Mortimer Menpes’ own surrealist insertion of original Japanese interiors into his London house at 25 Cadogan Gardens in the late 1890s. All of this is merely to point out how the Pacific has always opened up alternative histories, never more obvious than in the recent Art in Oceania, which must be understood as directed against the October School’s Art since 1900, which for all of its apparent ‘revision’ of received art history still remains deeply Euro-American centric in its emphases. It is what Gauguin, Breton, Kupka and Namatbara knew all along. We would write a history of Surrealism and Australia, therefore, only to make evident this fact, and to reveal that, if these global anthologising exercises are a phenomenon of the late 20th century, the global itself has been with us since at least the beginning of that same century.

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