Frontier thinking: fear of the frock?
Courtney Pedersen

Throughout the 20th century, Queensland was regularly described as a frontier territory, suggesting a lingering attachment to a story of wilderness and isolation. Local artists and writers, as well as visiting observers, made abundant use of this kind of imagery, but did this vision of a wild and unsophisticated place unfairly disadvantage Brisbane’s women artists and arts figures?

Brisbane’s strategic location during WWII meant that the war years saw a significant influx of people into the small city, but when that transitory population left, Brisbane struggled to reconcile the remnants of its seedy war-time nightclub and brothel culture with both the increasingly parochial, puritanical mood of the city’s establishment and the desire for a more cosmopolitan artistic outlook amongst younger artists and writers. Betty Churcher described Brisbane in the mid-1950s as a “populated rock pool after the tide has gone out” (Hatherell 2007, 1). Robert Hughes described Brisbane in the 1960s in even more unflattering, but equally evocative terms: ‘Perched on stilts beside its tepid river smelling of hot metal and tar’ (it) seems ‘further from Sydney than Sydney does from Paris. The art community there has something of the atmosphere of a moonshine settlement in the Ozarks’ […] ‘hemmed in by public philistinism’ (Hughes quoted in Cooke 1995, 33).

These pervasive images of cultural and social isolation, as strangely appealing as they are derogatory, worked well to reinforce the romantic and heroic positions of modernist artists such as Ian Fairweather, retreating to a humpy in the scrub on Bribie Island north of the city, or the hard drinking persona of Jon Molvig, expressionist painter and influential teacher, but it has been harder to pin down the role that women played in this story of modern art battling against both the geographical and political hardships of the era. While looking at historical images of Brisbane’s artists and art world figures of this period, I have been struck by the impossible gender divide so beautifully summarised by the mid-century requirements of fashion.
Robert Hughes’ description of Brisbane as a moonshine community appeared in an article praising the work of Jon Molvig, who Hughes described as the ‘Big Pappy’ of the Brisbane art scene. Comparing images of the artists, Margaret Cilento and Joy Roggenkamp, and the critic, Gertrude Langer with portraits of Molvig or Fairweather reveals the romantic vision of masculine agency that bedevils Brisbane’s art mythology, and the impossibility of the ‘frontiersman’ persona for women of their time. Jon Molvig’s 1963 portrait of Roggenkamp shows her as a voluptuous blonde, in a tight-waisted floral dress by Phillipa Gowns and enormous black hat. While this may well have captured Roggenkamp’s nature and spirit, it is not a portrait of her as an artist. It certainly does not hint at Roggenkamp’s enduring artistic fascination with the same Sunshine Coast landscape that provided inspiration for Ian Fairweather in the latter phases of his creative life. When we look at portraits of Fairweather, with his battered skin, whiskers and makeshift clothes, we can read him as the free-spirited rebel translator of the landscape. In photographs of Roggenkamp on the coast, her fashionable beach attire is at odds with this collapsing of artist and method and tells us much about the other social roles that women either desired or were required to carry out.

There were a number of important women associated with the cultural life of Brisbane, including the writer Barbara Blackman and the artist, educator and eventual director of the National Gallery of Australia, Betty Churcher. Archival material for Brisbane in the 1940s, 50s and 60s indicates that women were often recognised as substantial talents, deeply committed to art and professional practice. Both the Royal Queensland Art Society Younger Artists Group inaugural travelling scholarship in 1951 and the subsequent scholarship in 1954 were initially awarded to young women (Bradbury and Cooke 1988, 162-3).

A young Margaret Cilento played a crucial role in introducing Abstract Expressionism to Brisbane, but this came to be understated in favour of Jon Molvig’s contribution. Margaret Cilento received a local scholarship for travel in 1947, and in 1950 she was the first Australian artist to be awarded a scholarship by the French government for study at the Academie des Beaux-Arts of L'Institut de France (Miss Cilento Wins Paris Scholarship 1950). She spent time in New York in the late 1940s, which provided her with an exceptional opportunity to observe and participate in the
The burgeoning development of New York abstract expressionism. She studied and practised there before spending time in the UK and France. Her work from this period was influenced by both the Expressionism she saw practiced in New York and the work of Joan Miro, with whom she shared a desk at Atelier 17 (Savage 1995).

Images in the newspaper of Cilento, often wearing a painting smock and with her hair demurely braided across the top of her head, reveal an elegant, self assured and confident young woman of the world (Surprise 1951). Between 1951 and 1954 Cilento taught art in Brisbane and exhibited both here and in Sydney. She took over a studio at St Mary’s Church, Kangaroo Point, which would later also be the venue for Jon Molvig’s art classes, but Cilento’s family were high profile local identities and her position as the daughter of a well-known and influential family meant that her activities in Brisbane problematically attracted as much interest in the social columns as the arts reviews.

Her work was supported in Brisbane by the Viennese art historian and critic, Dr Gertrude Langer. Langer’s review of Cilento’s exhibition at the Moreton Galleries in 1954 praised the ‘personal note’ and ‘intensity’ in her work. She described Cilento as ‘one of our most gifted young Queenslanders’ and noted her substantial training (Langer 1954). Cilento wasn’t so lucky elsewhere. The patronising Sydney review of an exhibition the previous year made it clear that being a radical young artist was no job for a woman, with the anonymous writer describing her as having ‘had her fun’ with modernist experimentation, ‘behaving like a naughty girl at a beach carnival’, and jumping into the boiling sea before she could swim, thus treating everyone to the spectacle of a drowning artist (Our Art Critic 1953).

Cilento must have understood that it was going to be difficult coming home. She suggested as much in 1951, when she described herself as having been to Mars (Brisbane Artist “Back from Mars” 1951), but if Cilento felt she was returning from Mars when she arrived back, it seems likely that Gertrude Langer must have felt like the resident Martian. Langer and her architect husband Karl arrived in Brisbane just prior to the Second World War, and Langer’s art historical training and her support for modern art had an immeasurable influence on the development of modernism in Brisbane (Watson 2004, 59). Langer received her doctorate in art history in Austria.
and was interested in both modern art and non-Western art, neither of which had previously been part of a standard Brisbane art training. After their arrival in Brisbane in 1939, Gertrude became a vital conduit to a lived experience of European modern art. She had studied in Paris in the 1920s, as well as travelling extensively. Her own early enthusiasm for Cézanne was translated to the students and artists she met with in Brisbane. She initially held private lectures and meetings around the dining table in her and Karl’s first long-term home, a flat on Coronation Drive in Toowong, and then later lectured in public halls (Langer 1982).

When Langer eventually became *The Courier Mail* art critic in 1953 she was able to contribute to a more diverse public conversation about art, but toward the end of her life she felt disappointed that she wasn’t able to have a more substantial influence on the institutional life of the city (her lack of influence over Queensland Art Gallery acquisitions was a sore point). She endured ongoing and at times quite vicious conservative criticism for her enthusiasm for both modern and Asian art.

Joy Roggenkamp was one of the young artists who sought out Langer’s instruction. A precocious and ambitious young painter, Roggenkamp astutely cultivated a professional network of important Australian artists, writers and teachers that helped shape her development, including Langer, but also Sidney Nolan, with whom she travelled and painted in the late 1940s, and Jon Molvig, who was her teacher in the mid-1950s. Although she married and had children, she continued to paint and exhibit regularly through to the mid-1970s, winning the Wynne and Pring Prizes along the way. In her early career she was both highly visible and outspoken. Gertrude Langer recalls her turning up to lectures and other meetings in her school uniform (Langer 1982).

When Roggenkamp’s work was excluded from a 1949 exhibition at Finney’s Art Gallery (Brisbane’s less daring equivalent of the David Jones Art Gallery), rather than accepting her rejection meekly, the young Roggenkamp took her battle to the pages of *The Courier Mail* (*I’m disgusted, she says: 3 paintings rejected* 1949). That Roggenkamp was happy to wade into such conflict, speaks of a level of confidence and entitlement that is at odds with the occasionally demeaning characterisation of her in the press as a quiet housewife and mother (Aland 2001).
There isn’t one simple answer to the question of why these distinctive and determined women were not incorporated into Brisbane’s modernist mythology, but we can divine clues as to why being a woman modernist in Brisbane at this time was ‘problematic’. The modernist myth of artists virtually willing themselves into creative existence left little room for the web of advocacy and support that Gertrude Langer epitomised. Both Cilento and Roggenkamp endured criticism that overtly made reference to their gender, belittling their achievements and infantalising them. Their urbane and cosmopolitan approach to modern art, further exacerbated by their fashionable dress, hinted at a dangerous feminization that threatened to taint the romanticised story of mid-century Brisbane as the edge of civilization. So, finally, it might ultimately be the case that the evocative characterisation of the city as a brutal, shanty-town backwater left little room for an elegant Viennese emigré, a well-travelled daughter of the local ‘aristocracy’, or an astute professional watercolourist, who also just happened to be a bewitching, blonde wife and mother.

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