

# An opening

twelve love stories  
about art



Stephanie Radok

*'A revelation, a gem.'*

Nicholas Jose



## An opening

Born in Melbourne, Stephanie Radok has worked in Adelaide as an artist, freelance visual art writer and editor since 1988. She first exhibited her art at the Experimental Art Foundation in Adelaide in 1977 and her writing about art was first published in *Unreal City* in Canberra in 1986.

Stephanie Radok has a reputation as one of Australia's most lucid, fearless and best respected art writers, with over twenty years of extensive reviewing and critical writing for *The Adelaide Review*, *Artlink*, *Art Monthly* and other magazines. She has written many catalogue essays and was awarded a major New Work grant by the Australia Council in 2002. She was a Visiting Fellow in 2001 at the Centre for Cross-Cultural Research at the Australian National University. Over the last twenty years she has edited many issues of *Artlink* magazine discovering and encouraging new writers and artists and in 2011 co-edited the new series *Artlink Indigenous* breaking new ground in the appreciation of Aboriginal art in Australia.

As an artist, Stephanie Radok trained in Canberra and has exhibited widely. Her work has been collected by the National Gallery of Canberra, the National Gallery of Victoria, Flinders University Art Museum and private collections. Her art practice includes painting, printmaking, objects and installation. She has shown her work at Greenaway Art Gallery, the Art Gallery of South Australia, the National Gallery of Victoria, the Adelaide Festival Centre, the South Australian Museum, the Royal Adelaide Showgrounds and the Museum of Economic Botany. In 2011 a survey exhibition of her artwork *The Sublingual Museum* was shown at Flinders University City Gallery.

Also by Stephanie Radok  
(with Dick Richards and Julie Blyfield)

*Julie Blyfield*

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STEPHANIE RADOK



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*for Jerome*

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*There is a discourse about the arts, rarely written and at times unspoken which is neither that of historians so deeply tied to time and space nor that of critics concentrating on personal views about the arts ... It is a discourse of sensibilities affected by the excitement of visual impressions. It is the discourse of love.*

Oleg Grabar

# Preface

When we are young we live in no-time and all-time, when we get older we see that we are located in a specific time though we may not adopt the easy division of our lives into the decades and categories that are so smoothly described in newspapers and magazines. There is no dress rehearsal, no practice, no repeat performance, often no warning about the end of the show, so why do we store up experience, try to collect parts of our lives into patterns and examine them if not to learn something from them that we can use? We are made from memories of weather, pieces of paper and cloth, vegetables, fruit, days and moments strung together across blood, sinew and bone. Maybe some of us are made quite simply from the earth of one place, we taste strongly of one thing and belong to it. But most of us are made from many substances. We tend often to sum others up by their national or gender or racial or age or shape characteristics, yet truly each of us is a complex piece of embroidered cloth with different types of stitching and beading and threads and patterns and fringes, with a back and a front and an in-between. Or even a piece of cloth so full of holes that the background is also a part of us. And sometimes, someone or something reaches through the holes.

Like people art is made of complex patterns. The use we make of art depends on how we come across it in our lives – if it is around us everyday it can be especially transforming. It is an ordinary thing to buy or be given a calendar of twelve images to accompany the year. There is always something enthralling about a calendar – because it is not as precious as a book it can be dismantled without a sense of desecration, yet the images are in the format of a book, a closed object that opens up and contains

revelations that can't be seen from the outside. We live with each calendar image for a month, it hangs on the wall marking the days of the week, the passage of time, both routine and special days, and observes us as we observe it, in good moods and bad, in tears or in laughter, celebration and commiseration. The month begins blank and then is filled with reminders and appointments. The image hangs calmly above all the days.

The power of an image or object to give comfort and thus somehow to give love is most mysterious and perhaps a certain amount of loneliness or at least solitude is required to really sense it. When we are reflected in the loving eyes of another person we may not see our more quiet reflection in a picture on the wall but on the other hand there is much loneliness and solitude within human relationships. The German artist Paula Modersohn-Becker, whose artwork is full of the weight of objects, the solid bodies of people, animals and flowers, and the palpability of light, expressed it thus:

*I have cried a lot in my first year of marriage ... I feel as lonely as I did in my childhood ... It is my experience that marriage does not make one happier. It destroys the illusion that has been the essence of one's previous experience, that there existed something like a soul-mate. The feeling of not being understood is heightened in marriage by the fact that one's entire life beforehand had the aim of finding a being who would understand one. But isn't it better to exist without such an illusion and look this great lonely truth straight in the eye.*

And how does love get into or out of images? Is it the same as cooking, where love somehow gets in as part of the process of making and then emanates from the food and makes it good? Good food contains love; I know this to be true from experience because when I concentrate on making art my cooking goes awkward because the love has gone into the art. Of course

## Preface

not every meal is made with overwhelming love, nor is every artwork. The ongoing popularity and appeal of Vincent van Gogh's work stems from the sense of love that emanates from his art; this is love in the form of the intense attention and energy he applied to his work, it is like electricity and can make your heart move in your chest. The question of how an emotion finds its way into a line, a shape, a colour or a substance, a piece of music or a movie, is deeply mysterious, but it does happen. There is no recipe for it but only a few works made by any person are truly full of it.

Images of artworks that I have torn or cut from calendars and attached to the wall over the years have had a great influence on me. In them I hang onto some deep reflective experience that they offer, these creations, these companions, some of which have accompanied me for years. Many are now lost but live on in my memory.

I remember a photograph of a sun-drenched small wooden jetty jutting into a lake surrounded by trees covered with summer-fresh green leaves and itself covered with reflections of leaves. The jetty was almost invisible in the light greens, the dark greens and the blackness of shadow. The photo was from a Russian calendar and was an archetypal Russian summer image; such fresh greens must be ephemeral and balanced by long months of cold and darkness. I remember a Paul Klee painting on coarse hessian in which a red balloon ascended through a sky of yellow triangles. A sense of simplicity, lightness, release, elevation and tranquillity shone out from the texture and colour of this image.

Another memorable one that I still have is a detail from Hieronymous Bosch's *The Garden of Earthly Delights*. A sense of wonder in this work, its colours, the proliferation of animals in it, has made it particularly precious to me. It has travelled from

# Introduction

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At the beginning of his book *Modern Asian Art* about modernism in contemporary Asian art as neither a reflection nor a second-hand version of European art but a movement in its own right, John Clark quotes C.P. Cavafy's poem *Waiting for the Barbarians* in which the Greek poet asks: 'What will become of us without barbarians?' and answers: 'They were a kind of solution.' In his own words Clark describes the current opening up of the world through the changing of historical hierarchies thus: 'Byzantium is gone and the lands beyond it and the lands beyond them. We now begin to see each other, and no longer only the figments of force or imagination.'

The city of Byzantium stood at the geographical and cultural centre of the European and Middle Eastern worlds for more than one thousand years. It has long been used as a symbol of complexity and sophistication in art as well as an exemplar of cross-cultural fertilisation. In his poem *Sailing to Byzantium* W.B. Yeats described its essence as the song of a finely crafted gold and enamel bird. German artist Anselm Kiefer discussed the idea of Byzantium in *Boundaries, tracks, traces, songs*, a talk he gave in 1999 in Adelaide. The talk was illustrated by a single projected image of his 1989 painting *Abendland (Twilight of the West)* in which an embossing of a manhole cover represents the sun which sinks in a sky made of an immense battered sheet of

lead. Beneath this literally heavy sky a ravaged whitened and scorched land surrounds a central image of receding train tracks and somehow we know that these tracks lead to Auschwitz, that the train has gone and that more trains will come, and that the tracks can never be erased and that the earth is scarred with the memory of such eternally recurring tragedies, akin to the time when Demeter lost Persephone to the underworld and the ensuing winter turned the earth white.

Kiefer's talk was filled with a brooding *Weltschmerz* of nostalgia and longing. He contrasted Western culture to Aboriginal culture which 'knows how to sing the land'. Strongly informed by the interpretations of Aboriginal culture he found in Bruce Chatwin's 1987 book *The Songlines*, Kiefer poetically mourned the decline of the West. Looking for a reference in his experience for Aboriginal dot paintings he compared them to Byzantine mosaics but queried the fate in them of the characteristic Byzantine sky that represents infinity and is typically composed of gold foil beneath clear glass. He asks:

*But where is the sky, the golden background sky? . . .  
 Coming from the Occident,  
 From an ever sinking world,  
 We do not have (the vault of) a golden sky above us any longer.  
 And we never know how to re-create the land.*

I think there is a mistranslation in this last line and that Kiefer meant not 'know' but 'knew'; thus he means to say 'we never knew how to re-create the land' a version of the idea that Europeans destroy the land while indigenous people create or re-create it. The elegiac tone of Kiefer's words is typical of many self-accusatory Western voices. This self-disparagement ignores the richness and strength of Western culture, its admittedly

sometimes ambivalent achievements, its long history of creativity and diversity, its strong connections to other cultures and its perennial potential for reinvention, rearrangement and rejuvenation; and indeed the recurring syncretism of all cultures. In answer to Kiefer's question about Aboriginal dot paintings – *where is the sky? where is infinity?* – as many such paintings are aerial views of the land made by people who spend much time reading tracks on the ground, it is possible to declare that both the artist and the viewers *are* the sky, or at least in the position of the sky. The infinite gold is in us, in our understanding or gathering of knowledge, the relationships and life we develop when we use it. We *are* the sky. Think of the fairy story in which the three sons dig the field looking for treasure; the outcome they discover is that the digging is the reward.

This book brings together some artworks that remain in my memory and continue to stimulate my ideas. It is what artworks make people feel or think that is important, not how much they cost or even who made them. Yet art is never placeless or timeless. The last twenty or so years in Australia, during which I have been both making art and writing about it, is the significant time in which Aboriginal art has blossomed in new ways. I have lived through this development, thought and written about it a lot, as well as about art made by non-Aboriginal people. I discern three main ways people have responded to Aboriginal art – ethnographically, formally and with rapture. The first concerns itself with stories and context, the second with abstract qualities while the third is haptic, visceral, emotional and ultimately about love.

Mine is not the interpreter or translator's voice that explains what the work means to the artists or takes the authoritative position of telling true inside stories. For every art story in the world there is always more than one true story anyway, and always many untold ones. A frequent approach to Aboriginal art

## JANUARY

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### *the dignity of objects*

*Pebbles cannot be tamed  
to the end they will look at us  
with a calm and very clear eye*

Zbigniew Herbert

In 1960 when I was six I spent the day in the National Gallery of Art in Washington with my mother and sister. At the end of the day for being 'good' I was allowed to choose a print from the gallery shop. The print I chose was *Still Life*, painted in 1866 by Henri Fantin-Latour. It possesses the quiet bright presence of most still lifes. Such works are not all the same, but all possess a sense of the implacability of objects, their calmness or sense of moral certainty. I remember that choosing it was an act bearing in mind my older sister who had been 'bad' and complained that she was hungry most of the day. Did we really spend a day there? More likely it was a morning or an afternoon, two hours that felt like four to her. Because the painting has food in it I had the idea that it was for my sister as well as for me. I didn't want to be singled out as the 'good' one and have to face either her misery or her revenge. I am surprised at this memory but I guess I was, for the sake of peace, always thinking I could calm everyone down.



Our family's agitation seemed to have no end, though on reflection it was mostly emanating from the endless restless exhausting energy exuded by my father which I got to experience spasmodically again in later life, though never to understand or to feel calm about being anywhere near him, except perhaps when he was dying. As I stood next to his bed in a public hospital, in the steamy heat of Bangkok where he had lived for the previous twenty years, shocked by the clear imminence of death in his shattered body, he made faces at me and tried to get up and go home (this chronic impatience was partly the reason that his stitches were torn and complications set in). Did he know that he was so close to death? Maybe, though he certainly planned to live longer, had things to do and was, after all, only eighty-four. Perhaps he knew because, most unusually, he asked me to kiss him before I left. It was also at this time that his Thai wife and I both saw his hands next to mine on the bedclothes and saw they were practically identical (though mine are smaller) – 'same, same' we said to each other. How strange I had never noticed this before.

What can you ever say to a practically deaf man who never wanted to hear anything he didn't want to hear? When you are a child it means that you learn to be silent. He was unable to relax or let people be, though would occasionally collapse onto a sofa for an hour or so in the early evening, at which time a tiny bit of peace would descend on our home. Of course he did go to work and travel, and at such times rather than spend time together the three of us would each look for and find the simple peace of solitude as a way of regenerating. Thus at dinner, though we would sit together, each of us would read a book or sometimes watch TV but rarely talk. When he was there we were on guard throughout the meal which often – actually almost always – ended in tears or slamming doors. Being both predictable and

unpredictable it created surges of emotion that ruined my digestion. My sister used to always loyally take my mother's side while I, displaying the odd ability to see two sides of an argument, tried to find some kind of rationale in each parent's words as they maddened and goaded each other. When he finally left home for good in 1968, a few months before the Russians invaded Czechoslovakia, our relief was immense, though he continued to the end of his life to apologise for going. I was never able to tell him how very glad we all were.

Yet he could be generous, kind and charming, and was a good cook, highly intelligent and hard-working. Born to a Jewish father and German mother in 1920 in East Prussia, he had escaped alone from Germany in 1939 and met up with two of his older brothers in England. The three of them were interned as 'enemy aliens' when war broke out and put on a ship, the *Arandora Star*, for Canada, which was torpedoed, then finally sent to Australia on the *Dunera*, on which the European internees were notoriously treated inhumanely by the British crew. Arrival in Australia meant further internment at Hay and then at Tatura Internment Camp, a place where grateful peace from the war raging in Europe was connected with fear for those left behind as well as astonishment at the climate, flora, fauna and people of this strange land they had arrived in. Among the prisoners, who ranged widely in age and experience, were many German-Jewish intellectuals, so a university was set up and the primitive art expert Leonhard Adams was made pro-rector. A famous linocut called *Desolation, Internment Camp, Hay NSW* by another prisoner, artist Ludwig Hirschfeld Mack, shows a solitary figure standing behind barbed wire gazing up at the Southern Cross.

In later years someone who loved my father described him to me as a hamster always trying to escape. He would rush out of cinemas if the film bored him. In a museum he would gallop

through all the galleries and be ready to go in five minutes. If you managed to stand up to him and stay to look he would hurry off and go for a long rapid walk before returning to collect the stragglers with impatient comments. Everything was a rush, thus everything became an emergency. He was also always making profound all-encompassing statements about Life, maybe a German trait of thought which I have inherited along with the hands.

The Fantin-Latour *Still Life* painting on the other hand reflected something of the spirit of my half-Irish, part Scottish and part British rather irreverent red-headed Australian mother, her amateur but devoted empathy for literature and art, and her embrace of idleness bordering on laziness. She grew up in both Melbourne and the Mallee, and studied journalism at the University of Melbourne in the 1930s but left to work for an insurance company when her stepfather died. She was the one who enjoyed looking at pictures with me and perhaps introduced me to it as an escape from family tension. She collected books and vases, gardened, and enjoyed smoking and drinking more than eating. Picking flowers and arranging them in the right vase to create a picture, a moment of beauty, was an abiding pleasure for her.

The painting shows a book, a vase of pink and white camellias, a black and red lacquered Japanese tray, a half-peeled mandarin, a basket of fruit including quinces, apples and pears, and a fine white porcelain teacup and saucer with a gold rim. The painting includes just one teacup, because this is not a tea party but an image of pleasurable solitude involving food, drink and intellectual sustenance. The novel is a French one with a plain blue cover.

Fantin-Latour, who painted between 1856 and 1904, is best known for his flower paintings and still lives from which he made a living, though he sold most of them in England not in France where he lived. He also painted four notable group