

# An Image And Issues

There are many artists who have become associated with a single image throughout their careers.

The Australian sculptor John Kelly has become associated with the image of a cow, both in sculpture and painting. This may appear simple enough, but when one looks at his career, Kelly's art is as much about personal expression as it is about important events in Australian art.

By Roger Taylor

Although the artist John Kelly has carved out a significant reputation as a painter in his home country, Australia, with his painted representations of single and stacked cows (now achieving record prices at auction there), elsewhere it is a very different story. On an international level it is Kelly's monumental painted bronze sculptures of cows, forged at the renowned Fonderie de Courbetin in Paris, where Rodin once worked, which are capturing the imagination of the art world. In 1999, Kelly's *Cow up a Tree* (1999) received critical acclaim when it was included in the major international sculpture exhibition, *Champs de la Sculpture II*, on the Champs-Élysées in Paris. Earlier this year, *Three Cows in a Pile* (2001) overwhelmed visitors to *La Piramide des Ateliers: Festival International de Sculpture de Monte-Carlo*, staged in the cornucopian garden surrounds of the Casino there.

On initial viewing, Kelly's subject matter seems straightforward. His paintings and sculptures are of cows, and their universal appeal is that they can be immediately read as such. Yet, to understand Kelly's art fully, viewers must acquaint themselves with a much earlier pivotal moment in the history of Australian art, when, following his victory in the 1943 Archibald Prize<sup>1</sup> artist William Dobell was

publicly ridiculed for his winning portrait of fellow-artist, Joshua Smith. Although critics raved when Dobell's portrait was awarded the Prize, certain artists and others were deeply offended by the portrait. According to author Peter Ross: "The challenging complexity of the portrait made it very much a critic's picture. The public loved all the fuss about it: on one occasion

a Gallery attendant had to take the portrait off the wall to persuade the crowd to go home. It was *de rigueur* to see the Dobell."<sup>2</sup>

But those leading the outcry against the awarding of the Archibald Prize to Dobell's portrait asked the Trustees to reconsider their decision, threatening to take out a court injunction to restrain them from awarding the Prize to Dobell if they didn't.

According to Peter Ross: "The trustees remained stalwart and on March 1, 1944, a lawsuit was filed against them in the Equity Court by Mary Edwards and Joseph Wolinski, asking for a declaration that the award was contrary to the terms of the trust."<sup>3</sup> The plaintiffs argued that there was a distinct line drawn between portraiture and caricature, and that the portrait in question fell into the second category. After a four-day hearing Mr. Justice Roper reserved his judgment. Twelve days later, however, Mr. Justice Roper concluded that the Dobell portrait of Joshua Smith was "characterized by startling exaggeration and distortion, clearly intended by the artist," but found that it was a "portrait within the meaning of the wording of the will, and consequently the trustees did not err in admitting it to the competition."<sup>4</sup>

Also according to Peter Ross: "The short-term consequences of the Dobell-Smith *canon célèbre* was that two men suffered severe humiliation and irreparable damage to their



John Kelly, *Three Cows in a Pile*, 2002, installed in Monte Carlo, painted steel. All photographs: Courtesy of the Artist and Niagara Galleries, Melbourne.



John Kelly, *Three Cows in a File*, cow over Monte Carlo.

health and wellbeing. The wider effect of the case was to change irrevocably the way people saw Australian art.<sup>5</sup> It is here that the John Kelly story really commences. Kelly was born in Bristol, England, in 1965, and emigrated to Australia with his parents in the same year. One of nine children, he grew up in the Western suburbs of Melbourne, completing studies for his BA in Visual Arts at RMIT University in 1985, after his mother had won a local radio competition to raise the necessary funds to send Kelly to university.

In 1988, at just 25, Kelly was the youngest of 22 painters to be included in the prestigious Moët & Chandon Touring Exhibition with his cubist landscape, *Bellini's Labyrinth* (1987), the same year he staged his first solo exhibition of similar paintings at Melbourne's celebrated Niagara Galleries. Commenting recently on the record results achieved by Kelly's work at auction<sup>6</sup>, Bill Nuttal, director of Niagara Galleries, pointed out rather ironically that Kelly initially sold only one painting from this first exhibition. Kelly mounted two further exhibitions of what could be loosely termed urban landscape paintings

in 1990, at Niagara Galleries and the Essington Club at the Owen Dixon Chambers in Melbourne.

Shortly afterwards, he became infatuated by the Dobell story and produced a series of paintings, all appropriately titled *Dobell's Cow*. Attempting to create a context for the 20 paintings included in the exhibition of these paintings at Niagara Galleries in 1993, Kelly reproduced a small extract from the first proof of *Unforgettable "Str Bill" Dobell* by Dr. Edward MacMahon in the frontispiece of the exhibition's catalogue. According to Dr. MacMahon, as a camouflage artist William Dobell "was one of a group of several, later famous, artists who had been ordered to make papier-mâché cows and move them around the base in the hope of fooling Japanese pilots... For almost a year he shared a hut with fellow-artist, Joshua Smith."<sup>7</sup>

Dobell and Smith had met and quickly befriended each other while painting camouflage under the Allied Works Council around Sydney during the early days of the Second World War. "This is in 1942 when the Japanese were sweeping through the Pacific and bombing Darwin,"

Kelly says. "The Japanese had also ingeniously snuck into Sydney Harbor in mini submarines, causing pandemonium for a night. Recently, I visited Sydney and found where Dobell's studio used to be in Kings Cross. Interestingly, it is right above Garden Island, where the *Kuttabul* was sunk by the Japanese. This paranoid period where Sydney had mini subs running amok and shells being lobbed into its suburban streets was the environment in which Dobell lived. Of course following and because of all this, the bizarre camouflage scheme was commenced.

"Dobell's portrait of Joshua Smith was painted and finished during this period. It ended up winning the Archibald Prize. And there was also the weird coincidence that Joshua Smith was the runner up in the Archibald, so, if Dobell lost the court case, Joshua Smith would have won! Then, of course, they would never have spoken again. In fact, Dobell left a recording with the ABC to be played 20 years after his death. He probably thought that Joshua Smith would be dead but unluckily Joshua was not. He had to relive it all again as if a voice from the grave came back to haunt him."

Cleverly, Kelly merged these three disparate elements of Dobell's history into his own art, a significant breakthrough which now sees him as one of the most sought-after artists in Australia. "If you ask me what my work is about, I'll use a one-word reply, history," Kelly says. "And I think what I am doing now is painting and sculpting about my own history. It's quite evident that I've become associated with this image of the cow. What originally interested me was the history of that image in terms of Dobell and the camouflage work, and that whole period of Australian art in the 1940s, a period which I think is absolutely crucial to the history of Australian art. Working from that and ending up as somebody associated with that image on another level later in history is something that intrigues me as well."

"I based the appearance of my cow on Dobell's portrait of Joshua Smith. The whole thing about the portrait of Joshua Smith is that in the court case they argued that it was a caricature and not a proper portrait. That was because he had a thin neck and little head and spindly arms and legs. If you look at my cows, they have very long necks and a little spindly head. I call them Dobell's cows, but not because they look like the cows Dobell would have made during the War. They are very much cows of my imagination. Dobell made his papier-mâché cows in 1942, and whilst they were representations of cows, they were not actually about cows. They were a symbol and may actually be a symbol of something other than a cow. My work comes out of Dobell's history and what he went through, both during the war and during his court case with the Joshua Smith portrait. At face value my work is quite simple and accessible, but I think there are many layers underneath."

Around the time that he made his first paintings based on the Dobell's cow motif, Kelly also began to sculpt in bronze, producing small three-dimensional works based on his painted image, which he would then arrange in various orders. In his home in Brighton, England, for instance, guests are invited to rearrange three small sculpted bronze cows in any order

they wish on an old butcher's cutting board which serves as the sculpture's plinth. "I like the idea of the multiple, the multiple is part of it," Kelly says. "A lot of my little sculptures are stacks of cows, the same cow, only repeated and rearranged. But the big works, *Cow up a Tree* and *Three Cows in a Pile* are kind of strange. As ideas, they go back in time, to 1993 or 1994, when I made the smaller versions."

It was at this time that Kelly saw a newspaper photograph of the Gippsland floods in Victoria. In the photograph the bloated body of a dead cow remained stuck in the branches of a gum tree after

a lot of work for the City of Paris, so when we received the invitation for the Champs-Élysées exhibition, they were recommended to us."

Initially Kelly had applied for one of the Victoria Commissions in 1996, a Victorian Government initiative for public sculpture, proposing to mount *Cow up a Tree* on the Geelong Road in front of the You Yang Mountains. Failing to win a Commission, Kelly then made a proposal to the City of Benalla in rural Victoria, itself recently ravaged by floodwaters, to mount the sculpture there. That same proposal was shown to the curator of *Champs de la Sculpture II*, Mme. Solange Auzias de Turenne, who was drawn to the idea and invited Kelly to participate in the exhibition. Following its exhibition on the Champs-Élysées in 1999, *Cow up a Tree* was subsequently purchased by the Docklands Authority in Melbourne, and was installed in that area in February 2001.

Once *Cow up a Tree* had been successfully completed and installed, Kelly then had the confidence to take on the building of an even larger work, *Three Cows in a Pile*, following his invitation to participate in *La Parade des Animaux: Festival International de Sculpture de Monte-Carlo*, again curated by Mme. Solange Auzias de Turenne for the Principality of Monaco. The Festival, which ran between June and October this year, featured works by some of the most important sculptors of the 20th century, including Fernando Botero, Alexander Calder, Marisol, Navier Mascaro, François Pompon, and Niki de Saint-Phalle. Besides Kelly's *Three Cows in a Pile*, one of the most significant inclusions in the exhibition was Emile Antoine Bourdelle's *Grand Cheral - Sans Cavalier* (1913-1922), a monumental bronze sculpture on loan from the Fonderie de Courbetin, where it normally greets visitors to the foundry.

Apart from the work by German sculptor Gloria Friedmann, *Enzoyle Special* (1995), a stuffed deer mounted on a pile of waste newspapers which was located in the atrium of the Casino, all other sculptures were located in the luxuriant gardens surrounds of the historic Casino. At almost six meters in height and weighing around 600 tons, Kelly's *Three Cows in a*



John Kelly, *Three Cows in a Pile*, the third cow being mounted.

flood waters had receded. Taking the photograph as his inspiration, Kelly completed the maquette of *Cow up a Tree* in 1995. By 1999, the large sculpture had been completed and was standing in the Champs-Élysées as part of the *Champs de la Sculpture II* exhibition in September of that year. "It probably all started when I bought a computer and started doing montages of little sculptures, trying to make them look as if they were 50 feet tall," Kelly says. "I made the sculpture at the Fonderie de Courbetin in Paris. It's part of the Fondation Courbetin which was the same family that started the modern Olympics. They do

We truly overwhelmed viewers as they made their way through the Jardins du Casino, encountering sculpture after sculpture. *Three Cows in a Pile* is basically what my imagination came up with," Kelly says. "This work comes out of my work with Dobell's cows, in particular the painting *Cow Depot*, based on William Dobell's work as a camouflage laborer. If the army were making these camouflage cows, they would have put them in depots and they would have stacked them on top of each other. Three just looked right. It could have been five."

In the exhibition catalogue, the reproduced image of the sculpture is as it was when first completed. The black and white paint had not yet been applied, and it was obvious from viewing the finished work situated in the gardens that the painting of the bronze was what had made *Three Cows in a Pile* truly spectacular. "Black is a patina, so with bronze you can make nearly any color through a chemical process on the surface," says Kelly. "But to get white is very very difficult, so I've used a lead based paint. That painterly quality is almost anti-sculptural and I kind of like that idea of being a painter as well as a sculptor, using sculpture in a way that is quite painterly." He is adamant that, although he is best known as a painter in Australia, he sees no divide between mediums. "I don't think about it," Kelly says. "I make sculpture and I make paintings and I do drawings and I do watercolors. I'm even toying with the idea of making a short film. I don't necessarily think that there needs to be a divide. I have ideas that I want to express



John Kelly, *Three Cows in a Pile*, first cow being installed.

and sometimes they are two-dimensional and sometimes they are three-dimensional.

"The great thing about bringing my work to Europe is the way this work gets read in different ways. When we put *Cow up a Tree* on the Champs-Élysées, some people thought it was some sort of surrealist imagery, they had no idea that it came out of the history of Australian floods. Whilst *Three Cows in a Pile* references Dobell, in Europe it tends to be read more as relating to foot and mouth disease or mad cow disease, Europeans read it in a very different way to the way my work is read in Australia. Obviously the cow is not a real cow, it is a representation of a fake historical cow which is not a cow but a symbol of a cow. The cow as

an Australian symbol I find interesting for its very contradictory nature. I think it interesting that people think my imagery is very Australian because the cow is not an Australian animal. For me it represents many other issues to do with Australian history and culture. But, then again, it could just be a cow?"  $\Delta$

#### Notes

1. The Archibald Prize for Portraiture was established by the bequest of Jules Francois Archibald, founding editor of *The Bulletin*, in 1921. It is awarded annually by the Trustees of The Art Gallery of New South Wales. "The Archibald is a quintessentially Australian idea. At times it is a cartoon on current affairs, a bit of fun poked at a person in the public eye—but it has a vitality that is refreshing and bold. The Archibald often delivers excellent work and is clearly loved and recognized by the public as no other art prize." See Peter Smedley, "Sponsor's Statement" in Peter Ross, *Let's Face It: The History of the Archibald Prize*, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, 1999, p. 6.
2. Peter Ross, *Let's Face It: The History of the Archibald Prize*, op. cit., p. 57.
3. *ibid.*
4. *ibid.*, p. 59.
5. *ibid.*
6. In one case a painting which sold for A\$4,500 from exhibition in 1995 sold at auction in August this year for a staggering A\$119,250.
7. See Dr. Edward MacMahon, First Proof, extract from Unforgettable "Sir Bill" Dobell, in John Kelly, exhibition catalogue, Niagara Galleries, Melbourne, 1993, unpaginated.



John Kelly painting his Cow.

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