

Emotion Towards Nature: Michelle Collocott's *Three Ponds* Series

Steven Miller

"Knowing who one is, in the sense of what makes you tick, and then finding those places or those mechanisms that accentuate your passion, then as an artist you can start to play with it like theatre. It becomes a set; you've got the weather and the climate which create dimensions of theatre, and then you transfer all that back into painting" – Michelle Collocott, 2009

"Sensitised expressions of emotion towards nature" is how Michelle Collocott described her art in 1968¹. She was 23 years old at the time and had held her first solo exhibition at Gallery A in Melbourne the previous year². That show included 34 paintings, all of them landscapes and many taking inspiration from her recent travels up the east coast of Australia, across to Darwin and down to Alice Springs. The imagery of the works juxtaposed topographical bird's-eye views of the landscape with moments of more traditional fixed-point perspective. The medium was also a hybrid: tissue paper had been glued and ironed on to the surface of the works in a process involving collage, drawing and painting. Reviewers were largely positive, with critics responding to the humour of the paintings, their bright translucent colours and, above all, the lyrical and autobiographical quality of the works³.

Much has changed in Michelle Collocott's life since that time – she has moved overseas, to rural New South Wales, to inner Sydney and then back to the country again and, more significantly, transitioned from Martin Collocott to Michelle – but the source and focus of her art has remained constant. "That's my childhood," she explains, believing that a focus on landscape is naturally explained by the particular circumstances of her life. "I still come back to the idea of who are comes from our childhood."⁴

Collocott's life began at the Warragamba township, on the eastern edge of the Blue Mountains, where her father was an engineer on the dam construction. Later, the family moved to Castle Cove in Sydney. Family photographs and Collocott's earliest works of art show rivers in flood, trees greening and budding, snow, and bush fires. The artist's earliest memories are of being brought up with space, light and climate. Today, she lives in Black Springs, a small village not far from Oberon in the New South Wales Central Tablelands. It's a part of the world she knows well, having moved to the area in 1969 after returning from Europe.

Working and exhibiting overseas from 1968 brought Collocott into contact with the latest developments in international art. It was an exciting time to be in London. Alana Coleman was vigorously promoting Australian art in the capital. Lady Elizabeth Oldfield bought a large work by Collocott, which she hung in her Cadogan Square home alongside canvases by Arthur Boyd and Milton Avery. Collocott could have continued in England as a successful expatriate artist, as some of her contemporaries did. However, she wrote to her dealer Max Hutchinson: "It's now over a year and I feel that I've seen enough, and am faced with a choice of either staying here and settling down with a job and some sort of studio ... or doing what I have been thinking of and what I feel I'd rather do and return home."⁵

While Collocott created works in London that responded to the environment there, such as ***London, approaching village of Spring*** 1968, now in the collection of the New England Regional Art Museum, she missed the particular landscape and light of Australia. She was not interested, however, in painting a monotonous and hostile landscape that had become a trope in Australian painting under the influence