

IN OUR OWN IMAGE

THE STORY OF AUSTRALIAN ART

THIRD EDITION



DONALD WILLIAMS

pattern and varying the size. For this picture I began at one end and worked my way across. The painting dictates itself. It's like following an imaginary rule and then breaking it: yellow, blue, orange, purple, red. Then yellow, blue, orange, green, red. I am interested in the stripe as a motif. It holds a strong position in the history of Modernism—Daniel Buren, Bridget Riley, Morris Louis and Frank Stella, to name a few, have made stripe paintings. It allows for endless permutations and funky combinations and I enjoy playing around with it.

Peter Atkins (b. 1963)

Painter Born in Murrurundi, New South Wales, and currently lives in Sydney. In 1985 won the New South Wales Travelling Scholarship. In 1994 was Australia's representative at VIII—Triennale India, and won one of nine gold awards.

Peter Atkins in his studio, Redfern, Sydney, 1993
 Photographer: Richard Ludbrook



Q. What were some of the early influences in your life?

A. I spent much of my early childhood in the country in northern New South Wales and went to high school in Newcastle. I was there for four years and hated it with a passion. It was partly to do with the way I was taught. We were treated as a group, never as individuals; however, my art education, for that era, was actually quite good. I can still remember my art teachers because they really responded to me on a personal level and I responded to them. I went out of my way to listen to them and learn everything I could. I was really eager. At the age of thirteen, I decided to do night classes in art at a tertiary institution in Newcastle.

Q. What made you follow this path at such an early age?

A. Well, I was brought up in a very traditional working-class family where your gender often dictated the kinds of jobs you would do. It was expected I would have a wife and a family, own a house and play that role. But I was exposed to this new thing, this thing called ART. The teachers had opened my eyes to something amazing. They were really good—they gave us lots of books and prints

and we were exposed to a whole range of things I had never seen before. I started to cultivate this other idea about being an artist, but it took a long long time to realise that there was another kind of life contrary to what was expected of me at home. To do the night class I had to get permission from the headmaster to say that it would not interfere with my other studies. He wasn't going to let me do it, and I had to really plead with him. Looking back I'm sure that if it had been football or soccer I was wanting to do there would have been no problem, but because it was art there was this big deal. I do think that people should be encouraged to find their way.

Q. Who were some of the artists that impressed you?

A. I can remember looking through books and making my own copies of paintings by Noel Counihan and Stanislaus Rapotec—a fifteen-year-old doing my own version of these great works. Those two artists were probably the most influential. A few years later, when I was eighteen, I actually managed to get a job in a framer's shop and it was through working here that I met lots of artists. They all came in to get their works framed. I was always more interested in talking to them about their artwork than framing their pictures.

I was fascinated by their lifestyle, the practice of doing something they wanted; showing their work and being paid for it—it seemed fabulous! I just found it fascinating and never really thought it was possible for me. I eventually entered art school and my parents freaked right out—they couldn't believe it. I entered art school under the guise of becoming an art teacher, but then transferred to the National Art School in Sydney where I completed my final year. Moving to Sydney gave me the break I needed. I met lots of artists who were working in their studios, big names people I had heard of. They were all practising artists, where the people in Newcastle were primarily teachers. Michael Johnson was really amazing; I found meeting him so influential. I went to his studio. It was fantastic—big art works on the walls and paint everywhere—and he was a really mad sort of character. Seeing his life and his artwork, all those things around him, his book collection, his record collection, the clothes he wore and the way he thought about things—it was great. Artists are always so passionate about things!

Q. How do you feel when you see your work in a gallery?

A. Because my work is so personal, I feel it is beyond criticism. I can't be criticised for doing what I do. It can be challenged for its artistic technique or something, but I just do what I feel. If people don't respond it doesn't worry me. I was once really nervous about all that stuff but I don't care so much anymore. I've gone past that stage. When I saw the work in the Indian Triennale I was mesmerised by it. I had worked on it for such a long time. I could just see my life, where I was at that time. I do get a lot of rewards. I like seeing people respond to it. I suppose I like to be complimented. Everyone does I suspect.

Q. How do the paintings you have selected to be reproduced in this book relate to your three-month residency in India?

A. These works were made while I was in India between October 1993 and February 1994. The hand is the first work in the Indian Journal and is called *Assurance and Protection*. It seemed appropriate to start here because in Indian culture the hand means assurance and protection. It was like a kind of charm for me. It was to be something to ensure I would be able to work well while in India. I was affirming

my own self, my own space. It was my own symbol taken from Indian culture to protect myself. I had appropriated it.

The motorbike is from Dalhousi, at the foot of the Himalayas; in fact it is the village next to where the Dalai Lama lives. On the way to this village we passed lots of roadside mechanics, all of which had their own hand-painted pictures of these motor scooters. It was their own advertisement, painted by themselves. They were all so badly painted: the perspective was so wrong, the forms were wrong but it didn't matter, I loved them. I like the honesty involved in that approach to working. I like that kind of sensibility. I couldn't stop looking at these paintings. It was almost like everyone fixes motor scooters—everyone drives them in India. There are thousands of them; they almost take on iconic status. By this stage I was really into Indian Pop culture. Everything is handmade in India, even signs; it is not like here where things are professionally done. Rather than ask one of the mechanics if I could buy his sign and create mass confusion, in the end I just decided to commission a local signwriter to do a picture for me. I specified the view, size and colour. He did it in six hours. I signed it 'Motor Scooter from Dalhousi' and I put his name down.

I consider it to be my work even though Parkash painted it. It is his painting but in the whole group of pictures—the Indian Journal—it was relevant at the

PETER ATKINS (b. 1963)
Assurance and Protection
 (Indian Journal)
 Delhi, 18 October 1993
 (Imprint of right hand)
 Mixed media, 30 x 30 cm
 Collection of the artist



PETER ATKINS (b. 1963)
Motor Scooter, Dalhousi (Indian
 Journal)
 Himachal Pradesh,
 5 November 1993
 (Scooter painted by Parkash)
 30 x 30 cm
 Collection of the artist



time. It was something I was thinking about, and it was appropriate that it should be done like this. I often collaborate with other people in my work.

Q. What do you see as the role of the artist?

A. Well, this is a really hotly debated thing isn't it? My ideas about being an artist are very simple and I think it comes from the fact I grew up in a very orthodox environment where basic things were seen as quite important. My work deals with me and how I relate to certain things, like the environment. I have a very personal relationship to the things I make, to the extent where it is difficult for me to sell them. The role of the artist is varied in many ways. The artist is a monitor of society. They exist outside the function of the normal things that happen in society—they can look at things really objectively. They look at things and come to conclusions.

I think a lot of people working in their daily routine become complacent about life. I think they close down lots of their emotions, especially males. It is hard here for men to be emotional; it is not accepted in Western society. I think commercial galleries and public galleries are really important so people can see a whole range of things, see beauty, let off steam. All the arts are there to draw something out of people, and to make them feel something not experienced before.