

Rod Moss' Royal Portraits

Rod Moss is an Australian artist who in the 1990s began an extraordinary series of images of the itinerant Aboriginal population living around the desert town of Alice Springs. What is so extraordinary about these images? Today in modern Australia it is difficult for a white artist to make depictions of Aboriginal people. After two centuries of colonisation and the forcing of the original inhabitants off their lands, it seems too much to deny them the right of self-representation. As well, after a long and inglorious pictorial tradition, it would appear impossible to make an image of Aborigines that would not be accused either of primitivising or exoticising them.

It is in this light that Moss' work must be seen: as the revival of a tradition that was previously thought impossible. Indeed, it might even be argued that Moss paints this very impossibility, that he does not so much paint Aborigines as the problems involved in painting Aborigines. But he does this in an extremely intriguing and fascinating way. Moss shows the impossibility of painting Aborigines not simply by not painting them but by showing them as already painted or already as paintings. To put it in the form of a paradox, it is only by showing them as already painted and not otherwise that Moss is able to show the impossibility of painting Aborigines in Australia today.

That is, if we look at a series of Moss' works - at first sight realistic depictions of Aboriginal people engaged in inconsequential activities in and around Alice Springs - we can see that in the overall composition of the pictures and in the poses of the figures in them he replays any number of the

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great masterpieces of Western art. His Raft (1990) borrows from Géricault's The Raft of the Medusa; his Law Courts Alice Springs (1999) from Piero della Francesca's Resurrection; his Funeral at Santa Theresa (1997) from Courbet's Burial at Ornans; his Road to Arltunga (1996) from Courbet's The Stonebreakers and the Australian national classic Tom Roberts' Shearing the Rams; and so on.

What is going on here? In one sense, it is perhaps not so surprising, if we believe in the simple realist pretext of the images, that figures engaged in similar activities - for example, building a road - would adopt similar poses. Thus the labourers of Road to Arltunga can be understood unconsciously to be repeating the gestures of Courbet's The Stonebreakers and Roberts' Shearing the Rams. It is also undoubtedly possible to read the allusions in Moss' works as allegorical commentaries on the activities undertaken within them, conferring a kind of "high culture" respectability on the events of everyday life they depict, for example, Courbet's Burial at Ornans being used to provide a symbolic resonance to the Funeral at Santa Theresa.

This is so far the way these quotations in Moss' work have been interpreted, to the extent they have been noticed at all. They have been seen as an attempt somehow to dignify the impoverished and marginalised lives of the indigent people they represent. It is, of course, a profoundly patronising and paternalistic point of view, as though these people need the gloss of European culture, when it is arguably the very thing that continues to oppress them. And this interpretation does not even seem correct with regard to the specifics of Moss' paintings themselves. For one thing, for all of the effort to read these quotations allegorically, there is often no apparent connection between

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the activities undertaken within them and the work chosen to be excerpted, for example Raft and Géricault, Law Courts and Piero. For another, this reading relies on the presumption of a realist intention on the part of Moss when the thing that strikes us about the work is the unnecessary or even ostentatious quality of his use of high art sources. Finally, this reading cannot take account of something that Moss constantly stresses in his statements about his work: that it is made in collaboration with his subjects, who must approve of their depiction before his paintings are allowed to leave the studio.

So what is going on in Moss' paintings? Why this strange and seemingly wilful insistence on taking the scenes and figures in them from other works? How can this be understood as Moss' ingenious solution to the problem (for white artists, at least) of depicting Aboriginal people in Australia today? In order to answer these questions, let us make a jump - perhaps the most speculative and provocative we can imagine - between these supposedly most abject and lowly of subjects and supposedly the greatest and most sublime. Let us compare Moss' images of the Aborigines around Alice Springs in 20th century Australia to Hyacinthe Rigaud's portrait of Louis XIV of France, painted in 1701. What is the connection? As some readers will know, Rigaud's portrait has been the subject of an extraordinary analysis by the art historian Louis Marin in his book *Food for Thought*. In it, he looks at the way the king there precisely holds a pose - the so-called "fourth movement" from a particular dance. That is, he emphasises the way that the king already looks like a painting, as though he is already painted. And this allows what he calls the "model" to emerge, leaving as he says this term to "oscillate ambiguously between an ideal presence and a referential body, the King and the king, the Monarch and Louis the Fourteenth by name".

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But, again, what does Marin mean by this? What is implied by this ambiguous relationship between the original and the copy that the portrait of the king posed as a portrait brings about? To explain, let us think for a moment about what is involved in the painting of a royal portrait. Imagine, Marin suggests, the difficulty of painting a portrait of a king. Imagine the consequences of not getting it right! Indeed, a portrait of a king does not even count as a portrait until the king approves, until he recognises himself in it. In a sense, then, the royal portraitist, while they are painting the king - if they have their wits about them - is trying to imagine how the king himself is seeing it. He is trying to imagine how the king sees himself. He is trying to see the king from where the king sees himself.

In a way, therefore, as Marin points out, the painter himself is almost unnecessary. He can only see the king from where the king sees himself. And this, of course, applies to anyone else who comes to the portrait. They too can only stand in for that original gaze of the king upon himself. It is this gaze that allows them to look upon the portrait. And it is this gaze, finally, that constitutes both painter and spectator as the king's subjects - or, as Marin puts it in his elegant formulation: "This identificatory utterance [the spectator's statement that 'This is a king'] makes a king of the portrait and a portrait of the king".

And yet - this is the crucial ideological sleight of hand Marin seeks to unmask - if it is this recognition or acknowledgement by the spectator that makes both a king of the portrait and a portrait of the king, the illusion it works is that the portrait is already like this, that it is only a matter of following an already

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existing king. It is this that brings about the final effect of kingship in getting rid of the need for any original model in the identity of the portrait to itself. It is this that means that no actual king is good enough in comparison to him as a portrait - and it is just this sublimity, this mysterious excess brought about by the equivalence of the king to his image, that the royal portraitist is trying to capture.

It is at this point in his analysis that Marin returns to Rigaud's portrait of Louis XIV, and particularly to those strange, feminised legs paused in the middle of a dance step, supporting as they do the portrait as a king and the king as a portrait. For they remind us that this portrait is a kind of fetish, standing in for something missing (at least, the fact that there is nothing to see, no original model for the portrait, before the spectator comes to it). But Marin in his analysis defines this "fetish" very carefully not in terms of some outright denial of reality, but as what he calls its "suspense" or "negation". That is, for Marin, if the royal portrait as fetish "suspends" reality, it does not "negate it in a pure and simple manner. It destroys it, but not by means of destruction. It negates, but not in order to fill the emptiness".

This is the ambiguity - the dignity and the humour, the sublimity and the ridiculousness - of the portrait of the king; and it is why his two sides - the divine body and the feminised and eroticised legs, the glorious monarch and Louis the Fourteenth by name - if they cannot be put together, also cannot be separated. If the portrait challenges reality in the name of an ideal, it does not absolutely negate it. If it opens up a certain absence or emptiness, it does not simply fill it up again. In other words - and this is the difficulty of getting rid of the king, why at the very moment we kill him another always takes his

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place - if it is the king that hides or covers over the void at the origin of power, he is also the only way we have of thinking it. It is only through the king that we can think his possible absence, just as his worship is already close to his overthrow and regicide.

It is at this point that we might return to Moss' work. Obviously, there is a lot we would need to do to convince the reader that what they are looking there at is a series of royal portraits; but we might begin by thinking what it would mean to say that through his paintings of Aborigines Moss is seeking to show the impossibility of painting Aborigines. Or, more precisely, how it is through these apparently realistic renderings of Aborigines that he is attempting to capture what cannot be shown about them. And that, in doing so, Moss is indeed telling us something profound about the status of Aborigines in contemporary Australian society, as what we might call the "sublime objects" of Australian ideology. That is, to use the terms of Marin's analysis - but this accords very well with what we actually see in Moss' pictures, the "perverseness" that troubles us about them - there is a kind of ostentatious "posing" by these Aboriginal figures that introduces a split within them: they are not merely seen by us but already as it were incorporate, take into account, a certain look upon them. (We might say that not only does Moss not let his paintings go until after his subjects have approved of them, but that he is also trying to depict a whole series of white stereotypes and preconceptions concerning Aboriginal people.) This "pose" functions as a sort of obscene body within these figures, dividing them between their lowly human status and a powerful and mysterious presence, something thing in them "more than themselves". And it is just this indiscernible, sublime thing that we would want to call their "Aboriginality".

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To put all this another way, the fact that these paintings by Moss are also of other paintings makes it impossible to decide whether we are looking at is reality or only something standing in for it. At once there is no pre-existing model for these Aboriginal figures, nothing that comes before them, and they make us search for something behind what is explicitly declared to be merely a representation. To return to Marin's comments regarding the fetish, Moss' work both suspends our belief in some real Aboriginality only to make us believe in it again; through a process of self-reflection, something real is brought about, something in Aboriginal people "more than themselves". (It is something we would associate with that strange enjoyment or even jouissance we see in these figures, which at once seem rigid and mortified and stiffened and made erect by some invisible pleasure coursing through them.) This is the fantastic ambiguity of Moss' images: they are fetishes seeking to end the fetishisation of Aborigines. Like all royal portraits, they both expose and replay this fetishisation, show how it is brought about and repeat it yet again. They reveal that there is nothing behind our contemporary Aboriginal-kings, the holders of sovereignty in Australia today - no original model, but only our look upon them - only for this to become their ultimate mystery. Moss at once breaks with the long tradition of depicting Aboriginal people through clichés and archetypes - going all the way back to one of the first depictions of an Aboriginal man as the classical Dying Gaul - and continues and perpetuates this tradition just as it was thought to be impossible.