

"FAR AHEAD OF PAINTING IN N.Z."

Australian Exhibition Causes Much Discussion

THE exhibition of contemporary Australian art that is now touring New Zealand caused much discussion during the Auckland showing. It is to be hoped that these paintings have also made people think. They certainly provide grounds for deep reflection on the part of New Zealand artists.

Anybody looking at this show with an unprejudiced eye must, I think, conclude that what many of us hitherto suspected is true—that Australian painting is far ahead of our own in point of development. This display is probably inferior to the best that Australia could assemble. Some of the leading men are represented only by minor works. There are a few weak exhibits. But even as it stands, it is better than any collection of contemporary painting that we could bring together in New Zealand. To say less than that (so it seems to me) would be not only ungenerous, but misleading.

Alan Moorehead, writing in "Horizon" recently, remarked: "It is a notable thing that Australian painting is far ahead of the other Australian arts." The greater part of this development seems to have taken place during the past two decades. It is not so very long since Australian painting seemed to consist exclusively of pictures of blue-gums clothed in sentimental yellow haze, and of nymphs and satyrs copied from the Yellow Book. There is little or no trace of these influences in the show under review. They seem to have been completely outgrown.

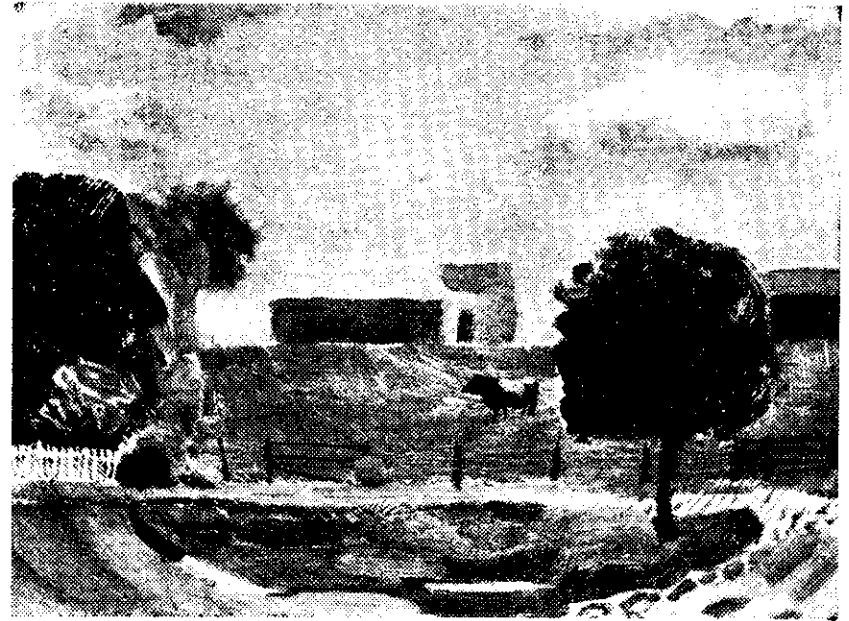
If it is odious, it may still be profitable for us to make comparisons—for that, surely, is one of the reasons for bringing such an exhibition to this country. What qualities do these paintings possess, then, that are for the most part lacking in New Zealand work?

The first thing one becomes aware of is that there is more skill and control in the handling of the material. The painting is more workmanlike, less amateurish. The second thing that strikes

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by A. R. D. FAIRBURN

one is the wide variety of idioms, and the maturity of style of most of the work. One doesn't feel (what is all too evident in our own shows) that whole droves of the exhibitors have come out of the same art schools.

Beyond question, there is a great deal of fine talent in New Zealand, especially among the younger people. Our artists have in many cases received sound and excellent training in the elements of drawing and painting. But most of them seem to drop anchor after finishing their training, and to go on repeating themselves year after year. It is just as if a young pianist, having built up a sound technique, were to go on playing nothing but scales and arpeggios and Czerny exercises. These Australians have learnt their drill, and then have gone on to apply it, developing along their own lines as good painters should. Most of the work here exhibited shows not only sound draughtsmanship and composition, and good qualities of line and colour, but other qualities of wit, elegance and sensuous appeal to which we are not sufficiently accustomed.



"BULL PADDOCK," by DOUGLAS ANNAND
"A fine and economical bit of painting"

I think it is impossible to avoid comparing the Australians' work with our own, to their advantage. But more remains to be said.

There is nothing in this show that could be called specifically "Australian" painting, except in the sense that the pictures were done in Australia. It seems evident that there is hardly any such thing, so far, as "Australian" painting—or, for that matter, "New Zealand" painting. It is all "European" in its style and character. This, no doubt, is inevitable. In neither country has a form of life yet been established that is essentially different from the life of Europe. This is true even of the United States. There certainly are indigenous growths of one kind and another in America and the British Dominions, but they are either of a low order, or are too primitive to have borne fruit yet. In all the higher and more complex activities of the spirit we are still very much involved in western civilisation, of which Mother Europe is still the genitive centre.

There is a logic of development to be followed, and neither kauri trees nor new traditions and ways of thinking and feeling can be grown in five years, or in fifty years. It is right and necessary that we should still be deeply involved in the European tradition. What we can hope for in the arts is that men will emerge who can assimilate that tradition and adapt it to the purpose of interpreting particular shades of meaning, particular differences in environment.

Even the most successful of these Australian paintings are in some sense

derivative. This is made the more obvious by the circumstance that nearly all this work is "urban." Cities and the character of their inhabitants do not vary much. It is in landscape painting that we expect to find considerable differences of mood and character from one country to another. It might be urged against the work in this exhibition that it is too cosmopolitan. The danger of becoming merely an anthology of fashionable idioms and "isms" is one that constantly threatens any community of artists living in a big modern city. I went to this show expecting to find too many undigested "influences," but was pleasantly surprised. Three or four of the works contain evidence of a too eager sophistication, a too insistent impulse to do to-day what Paris did yesterday. But in the majority of them European influences have been well assimilated, and have helped to produce admirable and satisfying results.

I suppose most people expected something explosive from William Dobell, after the newspaper row over his Joshua Smith portrait. There are three small paintings of his in this exhibition, all of which show him as a painter of great delicacy and restraint. He and Russell Drysdale are to be reproduced in the "Penguin Painters" series before long, by the way. Drysdale, probably the finest and most original of Australian painters, is represented here by a magnificent watercolour "sketch for an oil" that makes one avid for more of his work. Sali Herman has a big oil of a Sydney street scene, in which lovely colour and texture help to produce a haunting and melancholy beauty—the

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"WEEPING WOMAN," by JEAN APPLETON
"There is a wide variety of idioms in the show"

Sparrow Pictures