

KATHERINE HATTAM: A PREFACE

Katherine Hattam had a remarkable upbringing for a painter. Her parents, Hal and Kate Hattam, were close friends with leading Melbourne artists from the 1950s through the 1970s. They became ardent collectors of their work. Hal Hattam in later life turned from his primary profession of medicine and became a painter in his own right. Earlier he had painted alongside such artists as Fred Williams, Arthur Boyd, John Perceval and others. The collection the Hattam's assembled in their large Victorian house in South Yarra was a rallying point for artists, critics, curators and art world hangers on. It was always immensely lively; an endless conversation about art and artists, literature and ideas, notably lacking in malice, flowed freely.

In her teens Katherine Hattam began to draw untutored, spiritedly in an 'antipodean mode' with traces of Boyd and Blackman evident. They had all the promise of natural talent. Surprisingly, her parents encouraged Katherine to go to the University of Melbourne rather than art school. Kate Hattam, a particularly avid and astute reader, had never gone to university and wanted that experience for Katherine and her intellectually gifted sisters, Franny and Vicky. Katherine took English and Political Science as an honours student and did well. She had inherited her mother's avidity as a reader. Piles of orange Penguins and blue Pelicans are recurring images in her work. Not until she had married (twice) and had children did she settle to her vocation as an artist rather bravely going to the Victorian College of the Arts as 'a mature age student' as the baneful phrase of the day had it.

All this – the high class bohemianism of her background, her double education at university and art school and her delayed start as an artist – played into the distinctive quality of her art: graphic clarity and hidden significance. In those early paintings of rooms - her breakthrough pictures – large armchairs loomed, both intimate and oppressive. They were a *hommage* to her upbringing and a remembrance of past things. One work contained a passing reference to Philip Larkin and his celebrated poem 'Parents':

They fuck you up, your mum and dad,
They may not mean to but they do...

Her university years laid an impress on her early work. Politics as taught at Melbourne in her time had a strongly psychoanalytic bent. Among those piles of Pelicans, titles by RD Laing recur (*The Divided Self, The Self and Others*). Likewise Sheila Rowbotham's classic feminist text *Woman's Consciousness, Man's World* shows up at significant moments. They are pointers to the self-reflective nature of her art. She is drawn to texts that hinge on revelations of disguised meanings and hidden forces. Taking the title of LP Hartley's novel *The Go Between* with its elaborate plot of seduction through an innocent for a painting of her own, Hattam produced an unsettling still life on a kitchen table, stained and unstable.

What lies at the heart of her enterprise as an artist is her desire to give contemporary painting the same density, suggestiveness, allusion and revelation that she finds in contemporary literature and in the more imaginative, less clinical texts of psychoanalysis and psychotherapy. She wants to endow painting with the same substance, the same sense of 'paradox and irony' that informed earlier modern literature and its criticism.

I admire the literateness (rather than 'literariness') of this enterprise. The postmodern shift in painting over the last couple of decades has suited Katherine Hattam well. Allusiveness and irony are the timbre of the postmodern. The Merri Creek paintings are very much in that vein. Past and present are ironically joined. The Merri Creek of the Heidelberg's disappears in the pop palette. Again the 'hidden' element is the mainspring of the work. Bridges are thrown over the creek; graffiti decorate it; a shopping cart intrudes; telegraph wires whip across it yet the creek bends its way through an environment neither landscape nor city. It is clearly a place of delight for the artist, her 'lost acres'. Katherine Hattam has come into her own at the Merri Creek, shedding, for a moment, the burdens of the past, excited by the re-discovery of this 'lost domain' which she can claim for herself.

Patrick McCaughey