

A CONTEMPORARY FRENCH ARTIST IN AUSTRALIA

COLIN W. NETTELBECK

French painter, Monique Frydman, came to Melbourne in 1986-7 as part of an exchange program initiated by the Paris gallery owner Baudoin Lebon. With backing from the French Ministry of Culture, private business, and a number of local arts institutions, seven French artists - painters and sculptors - were able to work in various parts of Australia, from Fremantle to Sydney, and from Tasmania to Lismore. They were given studio space and an opportunity to show their work. In many cases, too, they did some teaching in local institutions. In 1988, in association with the Australian Bicentennial celebrations, a similar number of Australian artists visited France.

As Ian Howard, the Australian coordinator of the project expressed it in the catalogue of the *French Survey Show* (held in the Ivan Dougherty Gallery in Sydney in May-June 1987):

The French-Australian Artists exchange project is not simply about relations between states in some abstract global sense. It is also very specifically a facilitation of the individual (the artists) addressing the larger body (the national) and learning about its substance, motives and desires, from fellow artists, varied communities, and contrasting landscapes. (p.6)

Monique Frydman was born in Toulouse and lives and works in Paris. During her Australian stay, she was artist-in-residence at Victoria College, Prahran, for six weeks. She also travelled quite widely - and notably to Kakadu National Park. She returned to France in November 1986, but was back in Melbourne in February 1987, for the opening of a successful exhibition of her work at the Christine Abrahams Gallery in Richmond. The following exchange is extracted from an interview conducted during that second visit. It offers some interesting views on Australia, as well as insights into Frydman's own artistic preoccupations. In addition, there are many thought-provoking remarks on more general challenges of contemporary art.

CN: Can you say something about your stay in Australia? Your work, your contacts? Did you have much contact with the students at Victoria College?

MF: Yes, things happened quite naturally. When I arrived in Melbourne, I moved very, very quickly, because I felt that I had to get very, very quickly into my work. When I arrived, I experienced, very violently, an impression of emptiness and space. One of the most significant shocks in relation to Australia is this feeling of immensity, of the disproportionate, unlimited nature of space... So, faced with this extremely ambivalent feeling - I mean, it was fascinating, but at the same time rather disquietening - I decided to plunge into my work very, very quickly. The day after I arrived, I got my studio at the college, gathered my materials together very, very quickly, and set to work right away. The contact with the students happened very easily. They understood perfectly what I needed - which was to work without interruption in my studio during the week, in a fairly solitary fashion, and then, on the other hand, to devote a whole afternoon to them, when the studio was open, so they could come and talk to me and see my work. In fact, things worked out more flexibly. We would meet in the corridors at the school, or in the pub - so the exchanges were very natural.

CN: Did they ask you to look at their work?

MF: Yes. They are very hardworking, and since I was too, we were very much in the same situation. There wasn't any communication problem. They asked me to look at their work towards the end of my stay, and often, too, after we had been talking together. There wasn't anything formal about it.

CN: Did you find interesting things in the way they worked, in the way they see things?

MF: Absolutely. First of all, I was surprised by how many painters there are. That was a pleasant surprise, because in France, while it's true that there are also a lot of painters, there's also a whole movement doing post-modern work on the *concept* of painting - which isn't my interest - and so I was pleasantly surprised to find so many students engaged in the *practice* of painting... with the energy of painters and very "painterly" - with painters' interests...

Where I was perhaps even more astonished, was to find young artists very much involved with narrative, approaching painting from a narrative angle - what seemed to me a symbolic, or symbolist approach. Often with an interest in landscape, but tied in with a somewhat symbolic vision of the landscape, sometimes with a trace of surrealism... I was surprised, too, by the thickness of the paint work, the overload... I don't mean that negatively, necessarily - "overload" or "thickness"... But there was a lot of work with the *matter*, with the paint itself, and sometimes burdened with images that somehow, to me, seemed sometimes external...

CN: You have had the chance to see some of the landscape yourself. How do you react to it?

MF: Well, as you know, when you are very involved in your work, the way you look at what surrounds you is already coloured by your particular interest and concern. Now one of the preoccupations of my work has always been the relationship with space and emptiness... There has always been a preoccupation with a *tension*, and at the same time a sense of being suspended... So, when I got to Australia, I experienced a kind of duplication of my preoccupations, because I had this very strong feeling of the country being suspended in space... Not just in the quality of the light, but also as a continent, in relation to the rest of the world... I really had the impression I was arriving on a meteor...

As you may have seen, I work a lot with a partly non-covered canvas, and the empty parts, the unpainted ones, are just as important as the painted ones... So my concerns as a painter were intensified, whether in Melbourne, inside the city, in the relationship between the architecture and the sky; or outside Melbourne, in the nearby countryside, with the trees that are there like very abstract signs, very much drawn in space; or completely away, up at the "top end", where the landscape has still another design... All that simply confirmed the impression of an extremely abstract landscape... almost metaphorical... And that's why I was so surprised to discover, among young painters today, a surrealist landscape tradition, burdened with narrative - when the Australian landscape is completely abstract, really like a kind of abstract painting... I mean what is before your eyes. Which for me, makes it all the more fascinating, mysterious, and moving.

CN: Do you think that artists live any differently in Australia?

MF: I think there's a constant in the kind of relationship that all artists have with their work, whether it's in Paris, New York, or Australia... One thing that is very different, in France, is that the tension is extremely strong - the background pressure, the pressure of being constantly mobilised intellectually - it's enormous. There's a kind of inner discipline, very violent, that has to be maintained, which consists, while being constantly nourished by what is happening outside, in remaining completely in the extreme solitude of one's own identity. And sometimes that tension is extremely hard to bear. But I believe it is also very rich, and if you manage to bear it, it is very dynamic. But it is true that it is a very violent thing to live with. And in Australia, painters don't have that worry. So they have a greater degree of peace in respect to their work... But that positive thing can be transformed into a negative one - I mean one can get complacent about one's own work. The questioning is less violent. In France, we have to be faced permanently with the vision of past achievements and present works which are of great quality, great strength... We have to face the development of thought, of critical philosophies, the constant elaboration of new concepts...

CN: A cultural and historical burden?

MF: Cultural and historical, but also here and now. And you have to avoid being swallowed up by it, keep a very considerable distance from it... A sort of mental gymnastics.

CN: Do you think your own work will be affected by your stay here? I know that when you went back to Paris, you did a series of lino-cuts called "Dreaming Time"...

MF: That portfolio of six lino-cuts was what could be done most immediately, in that I used certain things I saw in Kakadu National Park... Aboriginal painting as *sign*, for example... But something that is working in me, and will be for some time, and that will certainly surface - though I don't know how - is a more luminous vision, lighter, airier... Until now, my work has always been rather dramatic, rather dark, and I have this feeling that something of my vision of Australia may unfold onto the canvas, something lighter, airier... Painting is a long process. You work out, little by little, your own language, through the materials you use, in the studio... There's never any obvious break. There's a kind

of perpetual continuity, questioning the preceding work with the new work. You never start out completely afresh, anew, with nothing in tow. There's the whole intensity of the earlier work... So when I arrived in Melbourne, it was with everything that made up my work, my preoccupations with the canvas, and all the signs of my pictorial language. And I worked with a lot of intensity, and I think I was continuing in the line of my preoccupations... Now when I came back, after two months away, and saw my work again, I was surprised, because I found it even more abstract than what I was doing in France just a while earlier, and perhaps lighter, fresher.... I would be curious to see my last works in France exhibited here, because I find myself wondering: is it the content of the work that is fresher, in the colours I have used; lighter in the organisation of space - or is it the Australian light that changes the inner light of the picture, which itself remains the same? Because it may be the Australian light, which is so intense, clear, brilliant, which makes the picture lighter... It remains to be seen!

CN: Has it been easy for you to harmonize your family life and your work as an artist?

MF: For me, yes. It may be different for future generations, but for my generation, as women artists, we were able to start from scratch. We didn't have any models. Which I find fascinating. Very very difficult, because everything is a big risk. But for my own part, it has been a question of remaining faithful to my own inner truth, outside any ideology, or ready-made image of what an artist should or shouldn't be. The whole nineteenth-century romantic ideal of the artist never had any hold on me, because for women artists there was no model. Everything had to be created, and we were the better off for that...

Since her return to France, Monique Frydman has held a number of significant exhibitions in Paris and provincial cities, and has participated in collective exhibitions in Spain and Portugal. In a conversation with Catherine Francblin, published in the catalogue of her October-November 1988 exhibition at the Baudoin Lebon gallery, she reflected again on her time in Australia and its effect on her work.

CF: ... I have never seen you use colour as you have in your most recent canvases. You're using "impressionist" colours, like yellow, and green. Very bright colours.

MF: Yellow isn't only an impressionists' colour. It's connected to brilliance. It seems to me that this colour found its way into my work during my stay in Australia. You know that I went there to work. I had a very special relationship with light and space. Space is unlimited, abstract, and the light is extremely strong. Besides, in that space and light any form stands out, very delineated and well outlined. It's an acid yellow, going toward green, as in El Greco's work. I've always been fascinated by it. During my stay in Australia I had a very violent reaction to that country which is cut off from the rest of the world. This feeling coincided with another one concerning what was already taking place in my work. I always felt very strongly that I needed a break, an empty period during which I could get everything organized in the painting. Colour must reflect this break in the painting. That's why I let the colour float on the canvas without using any around the edges. That explains the importance of yellow which by its irradiation is brightness and the suspension of light...(p.81)

Another striking illustration of the response of her sensibility to the newness of the Australian experience is in the notes she made in her sketchbook, during that trip to Kakadu.

Here is the *fall* of Europe
 The skies are splendid with no escape
 I dive into my work, moving faster than the void

The break. All the tragedies of political Europe
 This country is a *metaphor*

Abstraction.
 The landscape is pure abstraction. Sky without limit. Signs. Shadows.
 Very drawn-out trees. Orange eucalypts. The absolute strangeness
 of the territory light.
 You must not attempt at all to compete with the real landscape.

Red collared lorikeet. Blue parrot. Luzon bleeding heart. Pigeon.

The green and red parrots when they fly off the *green* opens up to show off the *red*. The black cockatoos when they fly off the *black* opens up to show off the *red*. They let themselves be swung by the wind at the top of the tree in a *hard blue* sky.

The cries. The creaks.

Here they all come, to drink from the swamp, thousands of black and white "pied herons" flying over my head.

Dreaming time.

I glide, my own body painting. Verticality!

Top End
Kakadu National Park
November '86

Monash University