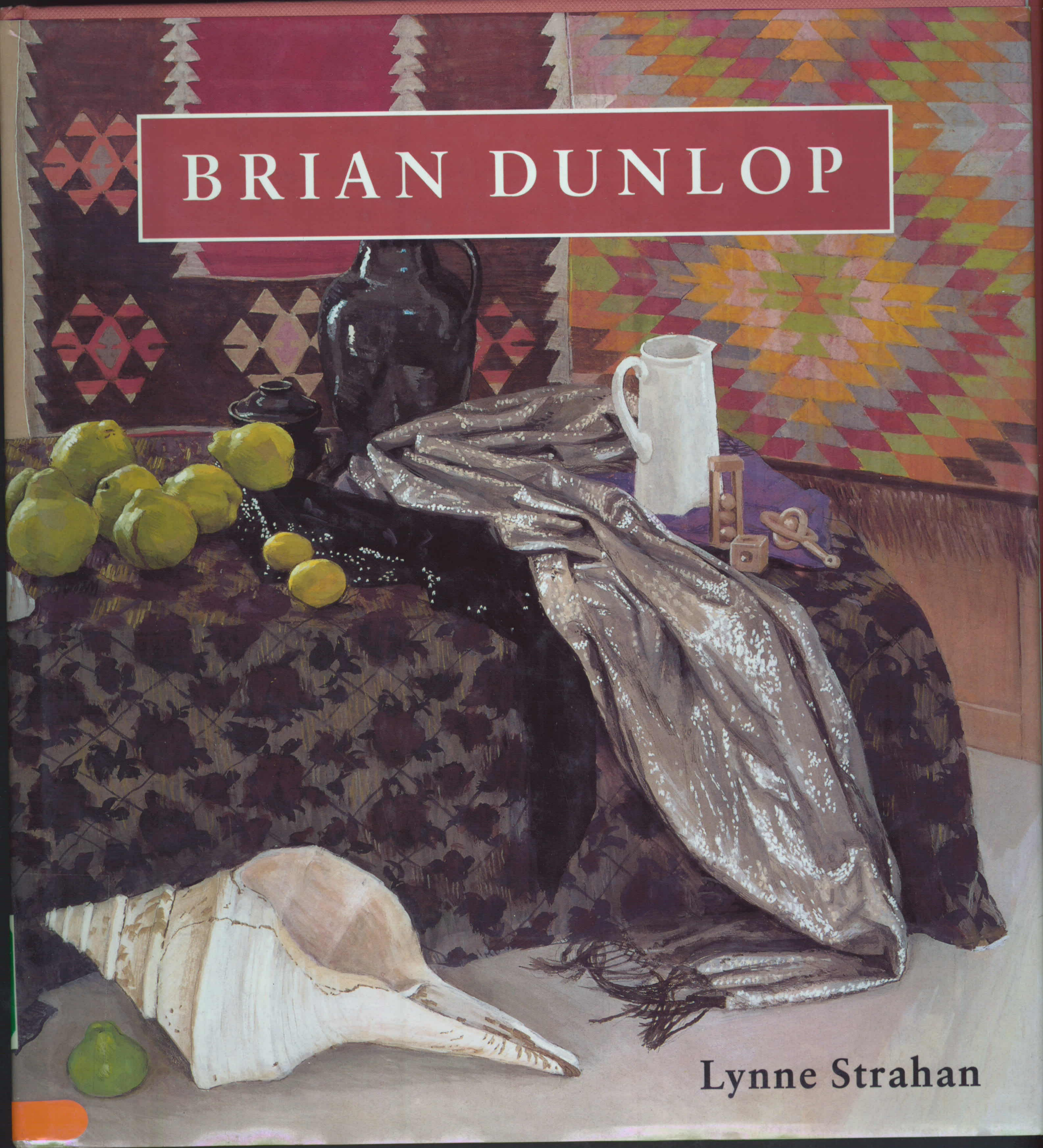
BRIAN DUNLOP



Lynne Strahan

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To my father, Leonard Dunlop

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Brian Dunlop

Brian Dunlop, 1992 (Photograph: Richard Crawley)

Foreword

Brian Dunlop has never deviated from his commitment to an aesthetic that values the endless resources of the traditional skills of painting and the paradigm of nature. Trends and fads have never enticed him from his course. The price of this stubborn integrity has often seen him disregarded by the fashion-makers and fashion-followers of art, who accept obsolescence as the inevitable consequence of change and who have set up an often spurious and unacceptable notion of what it means to be radical in art. The gain has been that, deferring to an ideal that transcends individual ego, he has been able to develop a body of work unmistakably his own and capable of continual renewal within its own terms. Another benefit has been that he can reach out to an audience who respond to the humanity and harmony of his images with relief and with a conviction that they are not being condescended to or misled. Since the first edition of this book was published in 1990, Dunlop's work has reached a new fullness in which all the qualities evident in his earlier paintings are to be seen luminous and sometimes transfigured.

Cover illustration: *Quinces*, 1997, gouache, 62 x 73 cm. Private collection

Brian Dunlop

A Web of Influences

The creative process, so far as we are able to follow it at all, consists in the unconscious activation of an archetypal image, and in elaborating and shaping this image into the finished work. By giving it shape, the artist translates it into the language of the present, and so makes it possible for us to find our way back to the deepest springs of life. Therein lies the social significance of art: it is constantly at work educating the spirit of the age, conjuring up the forms in which the age is most lacking.

Carl Jung

Commenting on *The Sea in the Land* (Plate 23), a painting of Panton Hill by Brian Dunlop, a newspaper critic marvelled at its technical mastery and then asked off-handedly why the artist bothered to expend his facility on such subject matter. Dressed in turquoise trousers and a vermilion blouse, a woman whose face is refined to mask-like notations stands sideways before open glass doors. In the background, several sagging fence posts are preamble to a pleasing, but unexceptional, wedge of Australian landscape. In the foreground, a cheap wooden table holds two toy-size Greek fishing-boats and a plain white bowl. Surely the contemporary world, the critic was inferring, disdains material that is at once devastatingly ordinary and frustratingly arcane. Another critic, who may be in need of a housekeeper, wrote dismissively of a Melbourne exhibition in 1985 complaining that 'our lives' are not as tidy as the world mirrored on the canvases. It might be said that assuming the right to arbitrate on the nature of reality for humanity at large is the ultimate critical delusion.

Dunlop offers little to salve the internationalists, who crave for proof that Australian artists can react seismographically to both the disastrous temper and the experimental frissons of the times, thus ingratiating themselves with a junta called 'the global arts community'. He is equally separate from the concerns of the nationalists, who allocate room to very few heroes and who see the chief creative virtues in the celebration of Australian landscape and the inflation of Australia's impoverished mythic consciousness. There might be some justice in saying, as was once said of poet Christopher Brennan, that, Australian light-filled though it is, the work shows little evidence that its maker has lived through an Australian summer. Not a shudder of Sydney surf from a local boy, ramshackle boats equally at home in the harbour and the Aegean, the totemic eucalypt reduced to watery reflections

Sleeping Dog, 1954

on windows. *Small Town Garage* (Figure 11), a stark study of a service station across a stretch of bitumen, is his 'Australian landscape', a description that might seem an affront to sentiments that prefer to ignore the reality of highway desolation and to concentrate on far-flung vistas.

In a country that associates the outdoors with engagement and vitality, he has most often been ensconced indoors like a hermit. Instead of comforting antipodean reminders, there is a complex and shifting web of European influences, both classical and modern, that ranges from Piero della Francesca and Vermeer through Braque and Cubism and roams over the ocean to include Edward Hopper and Andrew Wyeth. Stripped of their brocade-like embellishments, Japanese painted screens have provided a stringent mechanism for defining space, and New Guinean artefacts have infiltrated suburban normality to suggest the troublesome presence of household gods. This alertness to example often focuses on some quintessential detail in individual works, perhaps the magic, azure shore, unattainable yet always sought, in the background of Titian's *Bacchus and Ariadne* or the light-infused sleeves of the couple in Rembrandt's *The Jewish Bride*.

Borrowed elements, some of them quite abstruse, materialise like fragments of interior monologue in Dunlop's paintings. Motifs from the work of the outmoded British master Frank Brangwyn — a pair of white swans, an heraldic tapestry — make regular appearances. *Malatesta Kneeling* (Plate 11) gains its title from Dunlop's reconstruction of a damaged fresco by Piero della Francesca in Alberti's church at Rimini, whose almost menacing severity is hauntingly offset by Duccio's strands of angels elsewhere in the church. Even more esoteric, the wall behind the figure in *Tableau Portrait* (Plate 18) holds his reproduction in pastels of a musical beverage dispenser from an Islamic text, *The Book of Knowledge of Ingenious Mechanical Devices*. These tendencies to turn his back on manifestations of Australianism and to bower-bird from centuries of art history might seem to make him a marginal figure in the local context.

Despite the querulous mores of some commentators, the deadly silence of a few of the more notably barrow-pushing critics, and the feeling that he is something of an oddball or a throwback, Brian Dunlop is backed by a band of supporters who eagerly watch his progress. Some are sophisticated connoisseurs, whose tolerant eclecticism leads them to recognise quality in many modes. Others he describes as 'introverts who have the courage to make their own decisions', often against the dictates of the art establishment. They even include several naive enthusiasts and a handful of amiable eccentrics, who, while generally ignorant of art, respond forcibly to the Dunlop touch — and have the resources to indulge their fad. Given the technical and emotional variety of his work, they have much to choose from: spacious canvases, well-judged portraits, sumptuous still lifes, subtle studies in watercolour and gouache, pastels, lithographs, drawings and etchings. The scale might be as large as the creamy vastness that surrounds *Figure in a Red Dress* (Plate 10) or as small as the frail carcass of a *Dead Bird* (Figure 6). The attitude evoked might be sympathetic as in *Portrait of Joseph Brown* (Plate 13), with its liquidamber hues, or innocent as in *Baby* (Figure 12). Otherwise the mood might

be uncompromising and bleak. The veiled stare of his portrait of *Sir Garfield Barwick* seems to encapsulate legal hardheadedness, while the accoutrements of his profession hint at the sanctified aloofness of the law. In *Basilisk*, another painting from the time at Panton Hill, the emotions of nearness and distance become perilously intertwined. Dunlop has allowed himself unusual freedom to express his ambivalent feelings about his subject, who glares tempestuously at the world, like her reptilian namesake whose look was said to be fatal.

Nude Study, 1978

A Common Rhythm

Although they are not usually clearly articulated, the reasons given by admirers for liking his work are often expressed as a response to the elusive colour harmonies — some of them breezily opulent, others depressively subdued — that irradiate ordinary objects and the atmosphere of calmness that unites disparate elements into a whole and coheres into a highly distinctive style. These followers are often left with the capacious word beauty, which they mention as if almost ashamed to be caught saying something at once specific and vague — and deadly in a mental climate that is so alert to recognising beauty in ugliness and tumult that it is often blind to the beauty in harmony and quiet.

This reaction ignores the complexities of aesthetic enjoyment, for beauty must express tensions and ambiguities that reach beyond mere surface appeal to a more commanding sense of being. It is further complicated by the fact that Dunlop has often been criticised for using unattractive models: bony hips, a certain sinewiness, implacable detachment. The model in *Hillary* (Plate 5), who is a windflower, vulnerable, yet able to withstand the gusts, is clearly not a candidate for this complaint. But even she, with her rippling nose, full lips and near indifference of gaze, is not conventionally beautiful. He is also said to make his sitters for commissions, generally the female ones, look 'too old', and, honesty aside, in a youth-obsessed world what worse charge could be made? By contrast, a fatal blandness can ooze into the portraits of official figures and captains of industry, almost invariably male and grey-suited, whom he is most frequently required to record for posterity.

In the freedom of his own milieu, he paints nondescript, even uninteresting, subject matter. The craggy pumpkins and root vegetables that regularly appear in his work are hardly the fruit of paradise, while his accumulation of 'props' — cracked jugs, chipped enamel bowls, scaly bottles, shells and sea-worn stones — are definitely from the junk shop and the wayside, not the honourable company of antique dealers. However, he recognises that there is a mysterious component in these instinctive choices that redeems their ordinariness, and the elements are matched to reveal a kind of fittingness in their relationship to one another and to the whole that is aesthetically satisfying. It is beauty achieved through a process of revealing correspondences and drawing analogies that appeals to the inner eye.

'Chardin has taught us,' wrote Proust, 'that a pear is as living as a woman, a kitchen crock as beautiful as an emerald ... he has made us leave behind a false idealism in order to explore an ample reality where on all sides we have rediscovered beauty, no longer the dwindled prisoner of convention or false good taste, but free, strong, universal.' A similar process of transfigurement occurs in Dunlop's work. Adopting the Proustian mode, a Dunlop parsnip assumes the likeness of ivory or marrow, and his cotton cloth becomes a flying silken spool.

If pressed beyond generalities relating to the more obvious features of aesthetic pleasure, Dunlop's admirers would probably proceed to a further generality and say that they are responding with an emotionalism whose power sometimes surprises them to the presence of mystery in his work. The resonating images are imbued with an intensity that the poet Gerard Manley Hopkins defined as 'inscape' ('that "individually-distinctive" form ... which constitutes the rich and revealing "oneness" of the natural object'). They are often, as Hopkins might put it, 'beautiful to individuation'. At their most commanding, they attain a symbolic status and become agents of reconciliation. The sombrely abstracted figures are poised in a timeless zone at 'the still centre of the turning world'. Light cruises over surfaces, penetrating, illuminating, glancing, faltering, fading. Dynamic centres of energy beam from apparently empty spaces. The work is beguilingly straightforward and accessible, and yet beyond that it is tantalisingly unexpected and dream-like, as if two levels of reality are constantly interpenetrating one another and bound by the one pulse. For Jung, the artist submits then directs:

> *To grasp its meaning, we must allow [the work of art] to shape us as it shaped [the artist] ... He has plunged into the healing and redeeming depths of the collective psyche, where man is not lost in the isolation of consciousness and its errors and sufferings, but where all men are caught in a common rhythm which allows the individual to communicate his feelings and strivings to mankind as a whole.*

Unconscious recognition of and response to the presence of this 'common rhythm' is probably at the heart of the paintings' appeal.

While this may seem to be pointing to a generality that is both intangible and presumptuous, 'conjuring up the forms in which the age is most lacking' has a significance amounting to urgency in an era in which the uninitiated no longer know what art is ('art or a disease?' Jung wondered), although they are often too afraid of insider ridicule to admit their confusion. Although specialists and dealers claim to be acting for some grandly unspecified public interest, the trendy conformism of curators and the self-interested chicanery of art-brokers have become acts of violence on creative integrity and turned works of art into fashion accessories or investment commodities, luring the artist towards personal corruption. Academic critics (as distinct from scholars) have tended to be so obsessed with concepts that the actual works may become vanishing points or irritating redundancies, as the brain and the eye slowly divorce one another. The

craft of painting has been submerged by a swill of infantile individualism that glorifies in technical crudity and febrile emotion, equates size with significance and reaches an apotheosis of stupidity in performance art, which is, at least, soon over. A common language that assumes the possibility of communicating about standards and meaning has been stifled by a cacophony of mindless relativism and undiscriminating eclecticism.

In this atmosphere of Pompeii just before the catastrophe, degeneracy can become a virtue, and hardly a voice is raised to say that, for evil to be confronted, the possibility of good must be seen to exist. The obsolescence that is deliberately built into every facet of material existence by the demands of capitalist production is applied to the offerings of creative life. The influence of the machine has fatally infiltrated ideas about art and the artistic act. The fascination with mechanical contrivance has reached a pitch in the self-styled 'computer artist', who claims that the tired old constraints on artistic imagination are removed by the speed with which his machine can produce images — and he doesn't have to wash his brushes! Presumably he is one of a whole breed dashing away at their computers, like Nietzschean man, for whom God is not dead but never existed, even as an idea. Representing regression and alienation, these alarming developments — and they are not confined to the art world — seem to call for a restitution of human values in art.

A New Beginning: Panton Hill

'I want the work to ache with humanness' is the challenge provided by Dunlop to manifestations of nihilism, which are inevitably accompanied by a belittlement of the human scale. The impact of the deepening significance of this statement can be demonstrated by considering several paintings of the five years between 1985 and 1990 and relating them to earlier works. In late 1985, Dunlop moved from inner-suburban Melbourne to Panton Hill, a small rural backwater set in pleasant hills north-east of the city. Spared from the more devastating aspects of outer-suburban development by government ownership and hardly dignified by a town centre, the place consisted largely of neglected orchards and farmlets, each with its own dam, mustard or pewter-coloured according to the weather. At once sturdily Australian and comfortingly European, the landscape is characterised by a mixture of indigenous and exotic vegetation, bursting seasonally into a froth of freesias, sarsaparilla, watsonia, wattle, melaleuca, hawthorn, Victoria's spiky heath, the blossom of fruit trees and gums.

Lying on a five-acre block that sloped down from the road and into the bush, the artists's residence was a 1940s austerity house, asbestos-roofed, liverish in colour and declining into unprotesting decay. The structure may have been disadvantaged and unlovely, but it was enclosed on all sides by the bush, the paddocks seeming to tip into the kitchen, the gums, especially on wintry days,

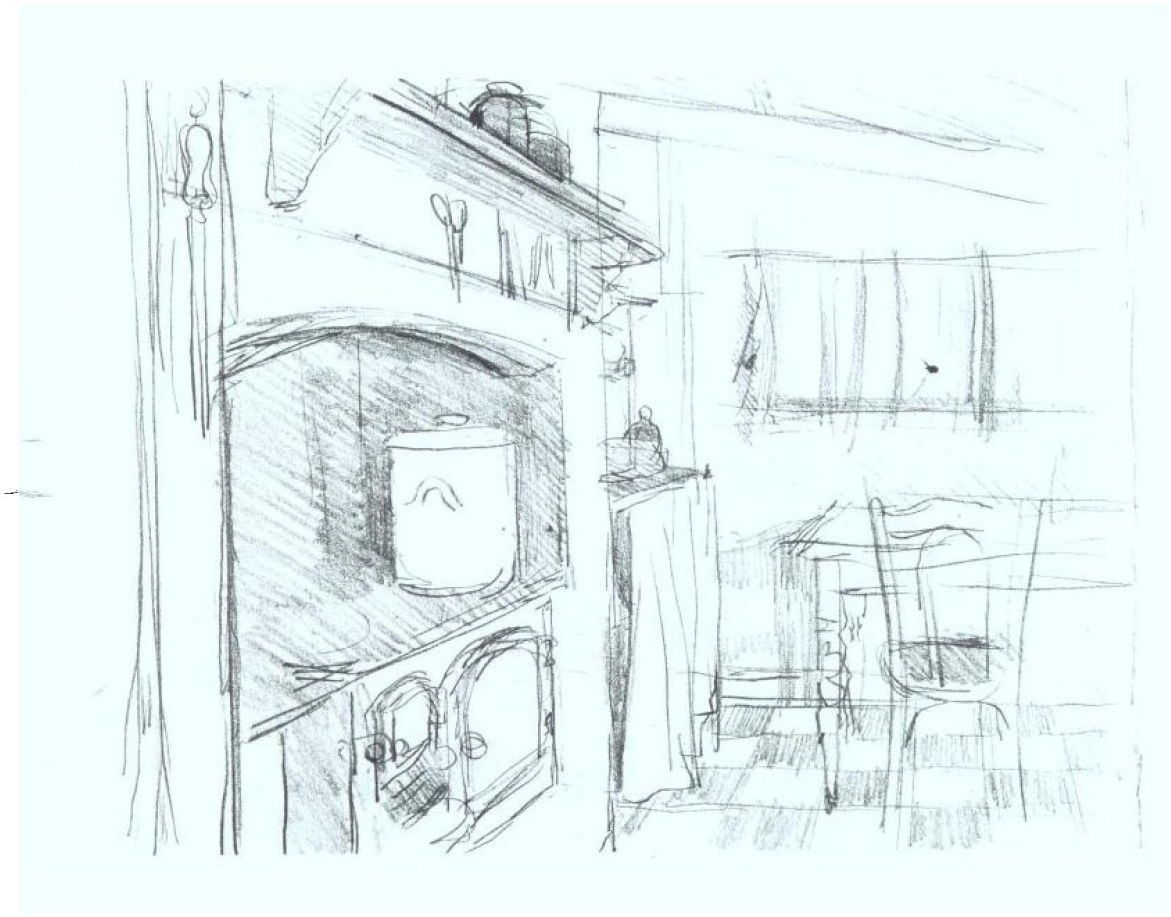
seeming to move closer to the study, the setting summer sun hanging brazenly near the balcony that was the house's only concession to gracious living.

Detached from the house, a former chicken hatchery, lean and low-slung, brambled in by blackberries and flowering grasses in summer, beset by quagmires and deluges in winter, became the studio. Ageing agisted horses were prone to peer through the windows, and a pair of peacocks, part of a wild, feathered and four-footed menagerie imported by the artist, honked unmusically from their station up the hill. In this beguiling but unlikely setting, the artist constructed his own environment, inserting a Victorian window that had been ousted from a near-city vicarage, arranging furniture and his peripatetic collection of bric-a-brac, changing the wall colour to harmonise with the objects in paintings that were being planned.

Amidst all this set-design, the makeshift tin-foil ceiling inserted by former occupants was retained and, to the surprise of viewers who expected something more finished to match the decor, appears on the canvases like the edge of a strange, flickering canopy. Exemplified in a 1975 painting, *Still Life with Fish*, his expertise with tin-foil had attracted admirers and at least one ardent devotee, who commissioned a painting in homage to aluminium and, after a long wait, received *Strawberries* (Plate 26), in all the sheerness of its pomegranate-pip reds and winter-melon green. The shadows and ice-cap brightness trapped in foil provided a painterly challenge, but for the painter, always responsive to the inferences embedded in the seemingly casual, the silvery overlay in the studio had celestial connotations as well.

The three years before the move to Panton Hill had been a time of disruption and uncertainty, spent partly in Sydney where his marriage collapsed; again he became an artist in search of a studio and peace of mind. *Family Group*, which shows his wife Pam and his two daughters Sophie and Claudia, reveals the essence of his married life, without the difficult moments. The trio is confined in a passageway that irresistibly conjures up the pleasing interiors of Dutch painters such as Pieter de Hooch, in which the constrictions of domestic space provide a frame of shelter rather than a sense of imprisonment. Dressed mainly in white, with touches of soft mauves and flares of scarlet, the woman and the two children are covered with affection and bursting with animation. The wife is confident and teasing, almost carefree. The older daughter gracefully accepts an observing role, while the younger one playfully lunges towards the painter. The family dog is reserving his judgment.

The marriage breakdown produced all the sense of loss, fragmentation and damage to the self that are inseparable from such experiences, but it also involved a renewed sense of personal freedom. Painted in a borrowed studio in Oxford Street, Darlinghurst, *Room with a View* (Plate 14), with its hemispherical window looking out over an urban vista and carefully arranged table-load of grapefruit, kurrajong pods, paper bag, bowl and jug, has a serenity approaching lightheartedness. Symbolising individuality, with the window representing both the intellectual ordering of reality and the possibility of mediating between the inner and the outer, the room had long been established as a typical Dunlop setting. Once again, chance



Ebenezer Sketchbook, 1972

had provided an ideal painting milieu — also the possibility for distraction in idle moments of watching the uninhibited antics of the Orange People in the red-brick building at the right. Rather like looking out of a suitably insulated goldfish bowl, it seemed.

Later he moved to Tuscany, where he spent a productive but isolated year, painting interiors and the month-by-month changes in the landscape around the farmhouse at Rilanci where he was staying. Like many other Australians, he was impressed by the prescribed rhythms and expectancies of life there, its exquisitely patterned predictability and quality of mellow austerity, described by Mary McCarthy in a comment that headed the list of the Sydney exhibition on his return: 'The wise government of space can still be found in the Tuscan farmland with its enchanted economy.' The setting was idyllic, and also within easy reach of Piero della Francesca's awesome frescoes in the Church of San Francesco in Arezzo, but he was dogged by financial problems and acutely lonely. Warm-hued and sunstruck though it is, *Interior* (Plate 17) suggests an atmosphere of monkish seclusion, and indeed, long uncultivated, the farmland looked like that part of a medieval hunting tapestry where the stag is running at bay. After these humanly unsatisfactory interludes, he reaffirmed his marriage vows to his work and decided to move to Melbourne, where he had spent a stimulating time in 1981 as artist-in-residence at the University of Melbourne. This benefaction had allowed the use of a gloomy, yet intriguing, Desbrowe Annear house in Ivanhoe, close to the fount of the Heidelberg school of painting.

During his second stay in Melbourne, Dunlop was assailed by further unsought trials, financial, professional and emotional — women in one or another irritating guise seemed to be the pervasive cause. However, the most serious was a physical one, the need to have heart surgery in November 1984, shortly after the unveiling of the Victorian government's monumental sesquicentenary portrait of the Queen ('as tall as a room in most new houses and about as wide as a family car' said the press, alighting heavily on a bracket of consumerist metaphors), which had been painted in a commodious but depressing studio in inner-suburban Northcote. Even so, the enforced post-operative recuperation produced a bonus. Unable to work on large paintings and totally house-bound, he experimented with pastels, a medium that he had not employed before, producing a series of images such as the diaphanous *Smouldering Light* (Plate 19), the tender study of a girl poised on the brink of adolescence, *Girl Resting*, and *Cleo's Breakfast* (Figure 20), which shows the typically Dunlop subject of a woman seated at a table, musing in shadow.

Art and life are often uncomfortably at odds; in fact, life is often a nuisance and a curse. Untidy, as our critic from several pages ago might affirm. Biography is understood, then must be discarded, says Brian Dunlop. Unlike some of his peers, his curriculum vitae is terse and does not bulge from his top pocket, waiting to be distributed to any soul who evinces interest or to the administrators who distribute grants. This reticence is grounded in strongly held beliefs about the ultimate anonymity of the creative drive. The artist, he believes, should have so many concerns that the personality blends into a complex ambience and does not dominate its inner life. Always receptive to the independent validity of what is presented, he must avoid imposing his own preconceptions on his material. Self-transcendence is all. Apart from its opacity, the concept is problematic in other ways. It seems incurably religious in the general rather than the doctrinal sense and therefore tarred, from some viewpoints, with obscurantism. It might also seem to lay the grounds for mischievous self-delusion.

Further, when it appears in a work, the ideal of self-transcendence often raises false expectations of the creator as person. 'How peaceful and calm you must be,' exclaim some enthusiasts to this painter, quiet almost to the point of self-effacingness. Could such radiantly and serenely classical work be produced by an individual prone to challenging tensions and nursing adamantly dissenting opinions? The attempt to build a bridge between the work and its maker can produce some comically misplaced assumptions. For instance, looking at the recurrent image of the window, one admirer concluded sorrowfully that Dunlop was a paraplegic, doomed to view the world from an invalid's couch. A painter's followers are usually not at all fussy about distinctions between the artist and the work, and, urged on by the mystique that surrounds the creative personality, they crave to peep into the life, reducing the work to an adjunct of biography.

The artist's proudest affirmation about self-transcendence cannot cancel out the simple fact that the self must be endured and that the life lived before transcendence is possible. Dunlop would readily admit that life's vicissitudes have sometimes cast their presence on his work in a way more doleful than transcendent. He has, for