

## Tony Woods: sense of inquiry fed artist's restless spirit



Tony Woods lived and worked in Melbourne within a few steps of everything he needed.

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If Tony Woods had lacked curiosity and held to his astonishing early talent, he would have kept the Tasmanian watercolour tradition in place.

Thankfully, that wasn't his temperament. He hoped to be successful, but submission to populist opportunity wasn't part of his make-up. And he wasn't the cliché of an overwrought, introspective artist seeking hopeless approbation. He was admired from an early age when his quiet and restless sense of inquiry impressed many, especially artists. But despite being well represented in public and private collections, he slipped from view. A certain unpredictability often eclipsed patterns of familiarity: what we thought we knew and

could grasp would change. Australia likes to receive its understanding of art and culture as conveniently boxed.

Anthony David Woods was born in Hobart in 1940, when interest in Tasmanian art was modest. A few names held sway but Tasmania was art history, the home of great colonial art. Woods was untroubled by working across ideas, building on what seemed to work and developing paintings of originality that were, unmistakably, contemporary.

A pattern of happy coincidences shaped his career. His mother was a dressmaker and Woods helped with the drawing and cutting of patterns. His childhood was somewhat erratic; his parents divorced, and Woods lived with his father while his mother went to England, eventually returning to Hobart. His future might have been sport. He was talented, keen and did well in athletics and soccer.

Sympathetic teachers, and new circles of friends in groups such as the Contemporary Art Society, regarded him as talented and interesting, with an idiosyncratic and individual outlook. In the space of a decade he moved from being a precocious youth, a fine draughtsman and superb watercolourist, to a distinctive form of pop-like figuration.

By the late 1960s two artists were being seen as fresh new faces, offering a particular take on pop: Woods in Hobart and Bea Maddock in Launceston. In 1968 Tasmania's Queen Victoria Museum and Art Gallery presented both artists in a two-person show. His paintings of richly coloured almost stained surfaces were overlaid with painted, lineal figures of poise, movement and no single viewpoint. There is no narrative — they are situations, observed and conceived pictorial contexts for anonymous figures.

Objects — strange ones for the time — became a primary subject. Coat hangers were a favourite. They were probably the most overtly pop works seen in Australia. They impressed a few and confounded many.

Curator, former museum director and critic Daniel Thomas, now a northern Tasmanian resident, regards them highly: "Right now in my

office, which was originally a guest bedroom, I have a Tony Woods painting of two wire hangers on a non-rectangular rhomboidal canvas, titled *My hangers* and dated 1967. It's part of an installation, hanging alongside some of my shirts on hangers ... (it's) among a great many pictures that my mother had accumulated mostly from the Little Gallery in Devonport.”

Woods often has been described as a painter of light, shadow and shade. Inanimate objects — their surfaces and the cast of shadows — became a fascination. No panoramas, no horizon line, but detail expressed poetically while seemingly taking a new approach, connects with his interest in silhouettes, images isolated and perfectly held in space and painted on paper or canvas.

His preoccupation with figuration would change. He was 28 in 1968 when he was awarded a Harkness fellowship. There were a few Australian artists living in New York, many part of the story of late 20th-century Australian art, including Brett Whiteley, who became a friend. Robert Jacks was a neighbour. Ian Burn was one of Australia's finest conceptual artists and Michael Johnson embraced New York abstraction. Woods knew each of them and for a while lived at the Chelsea Hotel. He got a studio on the corner of 7th Avenue and 23rd Street where he lived and worked.

He made extemporised, painterly abstractions — “dribbles”, where he allowed the surface and subtle irregular weave of the canvas to help define the making and resolution of the painting itself.

Back in Australia, Australian Galleries in Collingwood, Melbourne, which had given Woods his first mainland one-man exhibition, regarded his New York-inspired work as a capitulation to trendiness.

But architect and writer Robin Boyd admired Woods's international attitude and remained proud of the work he owned.

In November 1969 Woods's New York bedsit studio was gutted by fire. He lost everything, and almost his life too. All his Harkness work was gone. Everything. He was devastated and returned to Australia the following year.

He met his future partner, Melbourne-based Jenny Kurg, in Sydney, then moved to Melbourne to join her in 1971. They never married and had two daughters: Stellar in 1974 and Clea in 1977. His relationship with Jenny, one of John Wren's granddaughters, ended in 1986.

We often speculate on what success might have looked like if an Australian artist had remained abroad. Woods's art looked international but without a skerrick of faddish gratuitousness. It was deeply personal, as were his friendships, all expressed through his unaffected personality. Perhaps it's a case of being careful of what you wish for. Sidney Nolan, Arthur Boyd and Jeffrey Smart spent long periods abroad and became famous at home while interest in them internationally didn't amount to much.

In Melbourne, Woods's home and studio in Fitzroy were as one. He lived and worked within a few steps of everything he needed. Outside became the source of yet another direction for his art in the 1990s: Super 8 film. He was an experimental filmmaker in every sense of the term. Observed experience became an ambient, visual sensation. Local sounds and unrelated images were interleaved and became part of the whole.

Ensnared in Fitzroy, he didn't travel much. He never became an ageing self-spruiker. Others did that for him. A substantial book, *Tony Woods: An Archive*, was published in 2013 and accompanied with a DVD documentary.

Fitzroy-based artist Rosslynd Piggott recalls with affection: "I parked my (ex) car near his warehouse, home and studio. We noticed each other and started talking — it was that simple. Tony was the real deal — ever curious, his eyes wide open to the slightest occurrence that took his interest. I remember him describing with a childlike passion the patterns made on the road by a street sweeper and the interaction with flickering morning light. Seemingly slightest things could be extended for long and deep distances in Tony's open and subtle mind and then explored in numerous paintings and film."

In recent times, even with health challenges, Woods remained diligent to his purpose and active, painting abstract works usually every day. They were small in scale and painted on an ironing board.

*Tony Woods. Artist. Born Hobart, May 17, 1940. Died Melbourne, June 16, aged 77.*