

# THE STRUCTURE OF SHADOWS

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Tony Woods has always been concerned about 'emotional integrity'. This has seen him often work against the grain in preference for stripping things down to their essential vocabulary and formal structures. A strong distaste for superficiality explains why he has sought a more reflexive and at times metaphysical approach in his life and work

Born in Hobart in 1940, Woods was an only child whose anxious temperament was aggravated by periods of separation from his parents as their marriage failed. It taught him self-reliance and gave him a singular determination.?

His mother, a dressmaker, taught him about form, colour and line through pattern cutting and always nurtured his interest in art. After leaving secondary school, he worked as a proof-reader at The Mercury newspaper while attending evening classes at Hobart Technical College. There he came under the influence of Jack Carrington Smith (1908-1972) and Dorothy Stoner (1904-1992), figurative artists who worked in the School of Paris manner. In the first half of the twentieth century, Tasmania was well represented by a strong contingent of female artists, such as Florence Rodway, Edith Holmes, Mildred Lovett, Eileen Crabbe, Molly Stephens and Margaret Roxburgh, as well as Dorothy Stoner. Stoner, a superb painter and draughtswoman, had studied under several major artists, including George Bell in Melbourne in the 1930s, at various Ateliers in Paris and at the East Sydney Technical College under John Passmore and Godfrey Miller. As Woods' painting teacher she encouraged his explorative nature, passed on her passion for vibrant colour, a schematic cubism and strong figuration and her belief that a solid drawing tradition was fundamental to any representational idiom.

While acknowledging Stoner's influence, Tony Woods insisted on finding his own aesthetic language, and began working exclusively with watercolour. His first solo exhibition of watercolour landscapes in 1962, sponsored by the English Speaking Union, were respectfully conservative', but Woods began offending the purists with his over-painting of chalk and body colour or calligraphic patterning. (The Tasman Bridge 1962, TMAG, p.32) Watercolour, he felt, was a logical link to his island environment, the ocean's coruscant qualities and its boundary. The staining of the paper, layering thin washes and building the image from the back to the front, from the light to the dark, taught him about the complexity of structures and the problematic nature of transparency, features that continued to absorb him and have re-emerged in his film and video works of the 1990s.

After two years of evening classes at the Technical College, and painting en plein air at the weekends with artists Kevin Lincoln and Freddy Fullerton, Tony Woods gave up his day job as a proof-reader to become a full-time art student, gaining his diploma of art in 1963. Over the next few years he immersed himself in his art practice, moved away from the outside world and retreated into a large studio in Collins Street, Hobart. Developing his perceptive faculties was a priority, and Woods

explored his physical space and psychological state in exhaustive detail and responded only to things that surprised him or were calmativ. Two paintings from 1964, *Man's relationship with room* (p.34) and *Enclosed life* (p.35) identify this intense relationship with interiority.

A recurrent theme throughout Woods' oeuvre is his enquiry into the structure of shadows. Apart from capturing their pervasive, passive qualities, shadows act as a symbolic enquiry into the spiritual location of the self. 'Everyone carries a shadow in the physical sense. In existentialist or Jungian terms, the shadow represents the entire landscape of the unconscious or the seat of creativity. His interest in the Symbolist and Imagist poets T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound and WH. Auden emphasised this romantic inclination, with Eliot's words encapsulating Woods' aesthetic:

Between the idea  
And the reality  
Between the motion  
And the act  
Falls the shadow

For Tony Woods the shadow is a syncretic fusion of shade and light that hovers within interior or exterior spaces. An opened window blind casts shadows across a floor, walls and over objects; untouchable, random interceptions that move according to the play of the light source. As an illusory linking device between the figure or object with the earth, floor or wall, the shadow is both abstract and representational. A coat-hanger and the shadow it casts on a wall; a wooden chair hedged in a corner, its dimensional qualities reduced to a recessional linearity; a car tyre swing and its stark shadow; or the artist's shirt or a television precipitously placed on a chair at the edge of the canvas — all of which confronts the way we view personal, material things. These latter works bring to mind the American neo-Dadaist artist Jim Dine's repetitive works of domestic objects and clothing, or David Hockney's clean linearism or Bea Maddock's 'Coat and Shoes' prints of the 1970s. In Woods' work there is a subtle discordancy between the intimate and the objective, a play off between the familiar and the cool intensity of perception that pushes his penetrating studies beyond the genre of still life and into the surreal. In later paintings from the 1980s Woods' observations of light breaking through barn doors, or down stairs and over handrails, allow shadows to act as a conduit to the external world as well as creating transitional spaces that trap the viewer within his own private, muted Interiors.

In contrast to these more subdued works, Tony Woods produced a large body of animated paintings. Friends visiting his studio would pose and his work developed an informal, relaxed intimacy. Narrative content was kept to a minimum, which allowed the human body to dominate the composition, and with his interest in spatial motion he began to depict the model in consecutive positions within the same frame. This preoccupation with multiple movements can be traced to his athletic background, but it was also his observation of models as they changed positions. Though he was not conscious of referencing Duchamp or the Futurists, Woods was developing a figurative expressionism that straddled the traditional and the contemporary.

(Models friends 1967, p.36) His paintings, often on shaped canvases, were vibrant, intense in form and 'replete with symbols of the emotions'. There was a propensity to challenge and compete with the best — a legacy of having been a promising, elite sportsman - and with a brash insistence Woods emerged from his enclosed world to reappraise his public position, that of a restless artist as a work in progress. (A man 1967, p.37; Profound reappraisal 1967, p.38) In Tony Woods' compositions of the casual ambience of figures there is an affinity with the early works of Godfrey Miller, John Passmore, John Brack, R.B. Kitaj, David Bomberg, Lucien Freud and David Hockney. Gary Catalano suggests the British artist Francis Bacon's work also played a part in Woods defining his style, especially the use of bars that lock the figure into its own body (Each soul a prison 1965, p. 109) Woods also responded to the fluid urgency and brilliant draughtsmanship of artists such as Francis Lyburner, Egon Schiele, Degas and Ingres. The Tasmanian painter George Davis, who taught Woods at the technical college in the early 1960s, considered him a 'rare talent', whose exceptional facility as a draughtsman won him admiration amongst the small, contemporary Tasmanian art community Beyond its island boundary, however, there waited a much tougher art world that Woods had begun to navigate.

Regarded as 'perpetually promising' by the art critics, Woods' interchangeable styles and his dangerous flirting with gimmickry was often at risk of leaving his canvases unfinished, un-rendered and puzzling, they claimed. Woods, however, found admirers such as James Mollison and the Age critic and art historian Bernard Smith, who first saw his work in a group exhibition at Australian Galleries in 1964. Tony Woods never worked from sketches or used under-drawing; the idea and the act were one, with no time for delayed analysis or revision. His method of swiftly drawing and painting onto blank canvas or paper, and the manic virtuosity in his handling of various mediums, such as collage, monotype, oil or mixed media, together with the firm and confident line and fauvist palette, positioned him in the art market as one to watch.

In 1963 Woods formed a friendship with the painter and printmaker Bea Maddock, a former student at Hobart Technical College. Maddock went on to study at the Slade and taught briefly at the National Gallery School in Melbourne before returning to Tasmania in 1965. It is interesting to note that both artists' existentialist approach to the solitary human figure used shadows as extensions or props for the vulnerability of the human condition. Moreover, both depicted the figure in motion, whether sitting, standing, falling or walking. In 1968, these two artists held a large, joint exhibition of their works at the Queen Victoria Museum and Art Gallery in Launceston.

During the 1960s the printmaking revival saw the print as the new democratic collectible, and Tony Woods began experimenting with monotypes and the Rorschach technique. Creating large inkblots with water-based inks and oil paint, and embellishing the ambiguity of the patterns with turpentine, a surreal abstraction was introduced into his figurative work. (Smiling front 1968, p. |32)

This method of chance imagery with its deep, psychological vein, was a highly popular method of psychological analysis during the 1960s, especially in the USA, and suited Woods' experimental and introspective nature. It was also another way

of pushing the artistic and subconscious boundaries. Eastern philosophies were at the cultural front for figures such as Timothy Leary, Maharishi Mahesh Yogi and the Beat Zen poets Allen Ginsberg and William Burroughs, all representative of the mystical religion and ... the hallucinogenic drug culture [which] was to stamp the character of the decade, one that manifested to the full the sexual, social and political revolution of a counter-culture!\* (Psychoanalysis 1967, p.126)

As the 'swinging sixties' progressed, art audiences in Australia eagerly embraced new art mediums and eclectic styles. The 'abs' and the 'figs' had established a mutual respect for one another,' and an attitude of 'y not' and 'anything goes' developed amongst some of the younger avant-garde artists such as Mike Brown, Vivienne Binns, Brett Whiteley, Ross Crothall and Kevin Mortensen. Ironically, the naked body in art still posed certain problems and was subjected to Victorian era laws; as Kim Bonython reminded Tony, 'The South Australian law specifically states that certain sections of the human anatomy, including "pubic hair", should not be portrayed'<sup>o</sup> (To be continued 1967, p. 122) Internationally, however, sexual liberation, sloganism and political dissent reflected the ideals of the new age and the drawn-out agonies of the cold war and the Vietnam War, destabilising pressures that impacted in art and literature. The French agitated for intellectual, social, political and philosophical renewal; the British cruised with Pop art and the 'cool' generation, while the USA's beat, hippie and avant-garde movements continued to break new ground in contemporary art and culture.

Michel Foucault, Jean Paul Sartre, the decadent A Rebois by J.K. Huysmans, William Burroughs, John Cage and Clement Greenberg; Jimi Hendrix, Janice Joplin, Bob Dylan and the Beatles; Margot Fonteyn, Rudolph Nureyev, Joan Sutherland and Maria Callas, while Andy Warhol, Jackson Pollock, Robert Motherwell, Dubuffet, Niki de Saint Phalle, Francis Bacon and Brigitte Riley were just some of the names illuminating the global intellectual and cultural firmaments. As Dylan put it, the times they [were] a-changing'" (Physical violence 1967, p. 116; American trilogy 1967, p. 12)

By 1963 Tony Woods' abstract and figurative work had caught the attention of the mainland art dealers Tam and Anne Purves of the Australian Galleries in Melbourne and Kim Bonython in Adelaide. 2 James Mollison, then running Gallery A in Melbourne, was keen to promote Woods whom he considered amongst the top five figurative artists in Australia, 13 though Max Hutchinson, the gallery's director, was more reserved, writing, 'As impressed as I was with your work and uncompromising attitude I feel you must finalise some of these paintings — your prolificness [sic] is one thing but your current attitude in rushing onwards has an inbuilt disadvantage of producing unfinished work'\* Woods decided to stay with Australian Galleries, exhibiting his haunting Kafkaesque portraits, boldly figurative and mixed medium paintings, which stood out amongst the older school of Nolan and Boyd and the hard edge or minimalist painters of the day.

In 1967 the exhibition Two Decades of American Painting was held at the National Gallery of Victoria followed by The Field in 1968, both of which set out to define... particular direction[s] in contemporary Australian art'.!5 Of the first 'block buster' exhibition Woods found the works of Helen Frankenthaler, Arshile Gorky, Jasper Johns, Larry Rivers and Robert Rauschenberg exhilarating.

Inspired and keen to expand his art practice and life beyond Tasmania, he wrote to Godfrey Miller and John Passmore, and spoke to John Brack, then head of the National Gallery Art School, and the National Gallery of Victoria curator Brian Finmore, asking their advice about studying abroad. Miller's response was that London wouldn't ease his problems with isolation and loneliness, and Brack's views were that young artists should stay home until they had found their feet. '6  
By 1968 Tony Woods had won a Harkness Fellowship to New York, and would later be awarded one of the first Power Institute studios at the Cité Internationale des Arts in Paris. As an exciting, potentially major young artist his future seemed assured, and in August 1968, the twenty-eight year old artist from the small apple Isle of Tasmania, set off for the big Apple, New York.