

## THE TWO O-CLOCK HOUR

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I enter the vast, cavernous Art Gallery of South Australia, stepping out of the startling sunshine into the quiet atmosphere of the building. I pass through a lofty foyer of pale blue, echoing the sky outside. Rodins pause frozen in violent movement, greeting me and urging me into the Gallery Rooms. Their grotesque, headless bodies are hard and dark against the powder blue. But through the archways into the rooms the walls turn vibrant red, sombre and engulfing - the air so still in between. The space is enormous, the hum of an undistinguishable machine lends a sound of movement in the otherwise static atmosphere. Honey coloured polished floor boards stretch ahead of me. The high roof tilts away as I pause to stretch my neck far back. The ceiling is opaque with squares of frosted glass which mute the light. Large panels bordered with simple green and white flowers circle the ceiling. I walk over to a green leather circular sofa in the centre of the gallery of 20C Australian Art. Its cushions groan pleasantly as I settle in.

Before me is a mass of gilt framed squares. Patches of dark oils, splashes of impetuous colour. Looming landscapes of dark storms and harsh countryside. Smiles from faces suspended in a moment of history, painted by eyes that saw them. The rustle of nature and the chatting of people suddenly halted, trapped in a medium but thick with implication. I turn to see a stern old man looking at me. Blankly, without curiosity. His eyes are furrowed, his grim mouth partly hidden by an elaborate beard, white and soft. His head is cocked slightly to one side. I want to say something, defend my blatant scrutiny of the gallery. But Henry Parker would no longer hear mine or any other comments about him - he has long ceased to exist since Tom Roberts painted him. Strangers, alive and painted slide in and out of the gallery creating little and just existing.

I wait for the daily guided tour to start. My island in the middle of the room affords me the luxury of seeing deep into both galleries on either side. I wait in the close silence;

silence;

silence.

Like whole breaths. A quality of silence - not absolute but respectful.

Time has a knack of dragging in the gallery. People step brightly into the rooms but then immediately slow down and walk carefully, softly, trying not to intrude on the peace. They pass through archways thoughtfully, glancing from side to side and then choosing one to view first. Fingertips to chin as they side-step shyly along the walls, following the paintings in a linear formation. Eyes squint. They read the plaques and then squint again. Haughty faces smile stiffly back. Then they cross the floor in a slow rhythmic dance. In front of a square painting, they shuffle; pause. Step closer, step back. Pause and look. Crossed arms and frowning faces. Mouths slightly open in ignorant appreciation or eyes looking down the slope of noses full of obvious knowledge. The arms swing behind backs and chins are jerked in the air as they cross the gallery floor. The sense of expectation is such that one can almost discern the gentle lick of padding piano keys and expect to see tall women in sumptuous ball gowns dance across the parquet.

At the Art Gallery entrance, a short distance to my left, an announcement signals the commencement of a special tour. I glance through the archways and see a group of about 8 women who all seem to be in their 50s and 60s. They chatter thinly, the content pleasant and hollow. Formal black and brown handbags are passed over the front desk to be kept safe. The dull sound of sensible shoes shuffling softly. Strong faces composed, calm, expectant. An elderly gentleman appears through a door on the right and smiles briskly at them. He gives them a polite and enthusiastic greeting. Consulting his neat clip board for a moment he then holds his hand in the air seeking their attention. They fall quickly silent and listen to his opening spiel. I gather this is a formal, organised tour rather than the daily free one as they each collect a small, backless folding chair. He ushers them through to the first gallery and encourages them to make themselves comfortable. Arranging themselves automatically into a neat circle around the guide, their collective appearance is fussy and

Careful. Smiling obediently they turn their faces towards him like sunflowers following the sun. Curious, patient, obedient.

The guide is tall and elegant through his ordinary grey suit. His long arms wave gracefully with each explanation of detail, his hands delicate and fingers careful in movement.

Through his voice runs a measurable current of passion, the highs and lows of his voice are melodic and eager. It is clear that he not only *sees* the paintings, he sees *beyond* them; he holds knowledge. Standing before a painting I cannot see from my angle of vision, he picks out a particular detail in the brush strokes. I hear eloquent speech with English overtones. Snatches about Shelley and his connection with the painting. There is a quiet moment as he clears his throat and then begins to recite to the enraptured women, lines of poetry. The rich music of his voice gently resounds through the sober air, soothing. The words are enounced clearly and with easy understanding. A stillness overcomes the women and their eyes fix onto the guide. They lean in towards him. Carefully, their gaze drifts from his animated face to the innocent painting being gently berated by his recitation. He flicks long fingers across his high forehead, brushing away white hair which gently falls across his eyebrows.

People hover close by the group, not knowing whether they are 'allowed' to join in the listening - guilty because they didn't pay a fee that included tea and scones. The group of women are enclosed in a sanctity of inclusion. Their guide looks at each of them in the eye and gives them words and understanding. They would no longer look into the face of a painting without wanting insight; without wondering about the days and months and lives involved before the paint was first struck on canvas. His prominent eyebrows raised and furrowed in time with his lyrics. He finished the last line with an orchestrated pause... then flourish. Hums of pleasure erupted from the ladies. A shy chuckle of awe escaped one or two. He smiled and rocked on the ball of his feet nervously, fingering the papers in front of him. Waiting for the women to finish looking at the painting. And they looked with barely disguised fascination. Trying to find the words there, trying to see the picture he had just created.

Two children burst into the room. Chaos and a cacophony of laughter. They are in the opposite gallery and though the women turn slightly they are not too distracted. They are too busy picking up their chairs and shuffling onto the other side of the room in state of amused pleasure. Enthusiastically the guide bids them to follow him to the next painting - a mythical subject painted in soft, shady tones. They walk behind in clusters, chatting to each other excitedly. Some are serious, and others giggle like school girls. The ladies followed, circled and sat. Like birds their heads tilt from side to side quickly, eyes darting from him to painting and back again. They lean forward on their stools, faces open and eyes screwed in at the edges with concentration .

The children run screaming with glee across the parquetry. A small blond girl waves her arms in a furious run for my leather sofa. Her widened eyes glint with naughtiness. She hurls herself on and her thin little pony tail flicks her cheeks. Her sturdy smaller brother also launches himself at the couch. Furious giggling and squirming. They clamber behind me, making wonderfully loud rude noises. An ominous silence befalls them when the unmistakable clomp of angry footsteps crosses the floor.

Two loud smacks resonate through the quiet air. Their mother, gave them both a sharp slap across the face and snarled a curt order to 'Be QUIET!' She walks calmly back to the stroller she left a few meters away. The children behind me begin to giggle gently again, unfazed or perhaps used to their mothers outburst. They happily dive off the couch and dash madly into the next gallery. The stalking mother and pusher gave chase. The multitude of overwhelmingly sized paintings barely register in their field of vision. The enormity of space seems to remind them of freedom and they splash about in the copious quantity of vacant air, instinctively aware that this was a room for adults with nothing they could touch or throw. The shouts of the children happily ricochet off the blood walls long after I have lost sight of them.

'...highly erotic. I'll explain why...' the guide was saying firmly. A short cough. The guide clears his throat. The women respond with high pitched murmurs and broad smiles. He fingers his glasses laying on his chest. Then rubs his upper lip and pinches his nose as he begins to speak. His finger tips follow the curve of the seductress in the painting as he explains her significance. One of the ladies leans forward on her elbows. He tells them about

the shadowy female figure, shimmering in moonlight and veiled in a flimsy gown standing over the muscular scantily clad soldier, weakened in her presence. The women coo in appreciation. Then the guide points to a small face peering out from the trees behind the lovers and notes that he holds a net, ready to capture the soldier. 'Oh' say the women in long sighs. Again they have been allowed in. Other people had stood before the painting for a few seconds to admire the quality of detail and moved on to the next. The faces of the women was wondrous.

In the awkward pause of rampant silent thoughts, the guide abruptly consults his clipboard and falters slightly. He loses his way only for a moment and then returns to the hero of the painting. He smiles as he speaks, as if he were going to say something delicately rude. He takes out a handkerchief and wipes his nose roughly as he talks. Then he smoothly tucks the neat grey square away. The words he uses are diplomatic but the women giggle at his implications. '..reminiscent of Botticelli..' 'Oh yes!' they say, perhaps imagining Venus swaying to the beach in her shell. More chuckles hidden behind powdery hands.

A loud bell sharpens the soft air and the guide's smile instantly hardens into a stern grimace. An announcement for another tour breaks the reverie and renders him quiet for a moment. He says something sharp with a nod and rude jab towards the ceiling, where the loudspeakers are and the ladies laugh gaily out loud. He decides he has spoken enough about the mystical lovers and gathers his flock together. Onwards they go, towards the modern art. He points them far beyond my vision, up a flight of distant stairs. The faithful waft past with a blur of colours and conservative perfumes, curiosity and enjoyment evident in their quickened pace and lively conversation. The back of their heads nod together, hands rest lightly on opposite shoulders and then are thrown up in an expression of delight. The guide walks behind them looking at them indulgently. As he passes me, confident, without the careful pace of the ignorant, I catch a smile smudge across his face. He gives me and my notebook an easy nod and acknowledgment. But not entry.