**Heide Circle**

The group of avant-garde Australian artists and their supporters, now identified as the Heide circle, evolved over three decades from the pioneering modernism of the early 1930s on into the post-war era of the mid-1960s. These Melbourne-based artists constituted the essential core of radical Australian modernism; the early phase including most notably Sidney Nolan, Albert Tucker, Arthur Boyd John Perceval and the Russian-born émigré figure Danila Vassilieff. The work of these pioneering artists demonstrated a highly original antipodean response to European Expressionist, Cubist and Surrealist movements, together with a new fascination with untutored and naïve art. The group shared personal and institutional support from the art collectors and patrons John and Sunday Reed, whose semi-rural home ‘Heide’ on the outskirts of Melbourne became the focus of the movement which in 1938, spearheaded the establishment of the Contemporary Art Society (CAS) in order to promote the modernist movement in Australian art. Along with the young poet Max Harris, the Reeds also began publication of the key cultural journal *Angry Penguins*, dedicated to championing radical art and literature. These initiatives eventually collapsed in 1947. However, the revival of the CAS in 1953 initiated a second phase of the Heide circle, together with a new generation of artists.

The history of the Heide circle began in 1934, with recently married John and Sunday Reed’s acquisition of a small weatherboard farmhouse and its seven hectares of land fronting onto the Yarra River adjacent to the outer suburb of Heidelberg (the origin of its name). The Reeds had already developed an interest in advanced art and soon became supporters of the young rebel modernist painters Sam Atyeo and his partner Moya Dyring, who left for Paris in 1936. By the time of the foundation of the CAS the Reeds’ focus was on championing the work of Vassilieff, as well as the younger artists Nolan, Tucker and Tucker’s wife Joy Hester. In 1943 the Reeds joined Max Harris in establishing the publishing company Reed & Harris to publish a wide range of avant-garde literature. Its main concern, however, was the publication of *Angry Penguins*, which famously became the victim of the infamous 1944 ‘Ern Malley’ literary hoax attacking modernism. By the 1940s, Heide, with its ambitious gardens and the generosity of the celebrated hospitality and patronage of the Reeds, had become the focus of Melbourne’s avant-garde modernism.

The 1940s circle of Heide artists is now collectively labelled the ‘Angry Penguins’, a consequence of their association with Reed & Harris’ short-lived art journal. Of all of the artists working within the ambit of Heide, however, it was Sidney Nolan’s relationship with the Reeds that was the most intimate and intense, the artist spending much time living there between 1941 and his acrimonious departure in 1947. In his final two years in residence, Nolan completed his celebrated first series of 27 paintings on the subject of the Australian bushranger Ned Kelly, which was arguably the most complex and significant achievement in 20th century Australian art. Between 1943 and 1947 Albert Tucker produced a comparable series of paintings, the *Images of Modern Evil*. While, in a personal sense, less closely connected to the Heide world, at this time Arthur Boyd and John Perceval also painted their own respective series of nightmarish fantasies on the theme of wartime Melbourne.

In the early 1950s the Melbourne branch of the CAS was revived and, together with its associated Gallery of Contemporary Art, a new group of artists and poets formed at Heide – principally Charles Blackman, Barrett Reid, Mirka Mora, and by 1962 the more radical Sydney-based artists Ross Crothall and Mike Brown. In 1958 the gallery was reconstituted as the Museum of Modern Art of Australia with the Reed collection at its core. Lasting eight years, the museum in turn became the basis of a more ambitious gallery, which opened in 1981 in Heide II, the uncompromisingly modernist house built by the Reeds in 1965. Now operating as the Heide Museum of Modern Art, the museum’s extensive and unique collection embodies the spirit of Australia’s most radical avant-garde movement.

References and further reading

---- (1988) *Angry Penguins and Realist Painting in Melbourne in the 1940s*, London, Hayward Gallery (Catalogue of the first overseas exhibition focussing primarily on the Heide circle and containing several key essays, especially Barrett Reid’s incisive text, ‘Making it New in Australia: Some Notes on Sunday and John Reed’).

Burke, J (2004) *The Heart Garden: Sunday Reed and Heide*, Milson’s Point, NSW, Knopf (at present the only detailed biographical account of the lives of John and Sunday Reed and the development of the Heide world).

Harding, L & Morgan, K (2012) *Sunday’s Garden: growing Heide*, Melbourne, Miegunyah Press (A valuable recent publication sponsored by the Heide Museum of Modern Art, which details the origins and evolution of the two Heide homes amidst the Reed’s celebrated garden).

Haese, R. (1981) *Rebels and Precursors: the revolutionary years of Australian art* 1937-1947, Melbourne: Allen Lane. (A pioneering account of the first phase of the Heide circle setting the art of the Angry Penguin group of artists within the social and political context of the pre-war years. It remains the standard text for this key period).

Heathcote, C (1995) *A Quiet Revolution: the rise of Australia art 1946-1968*, Melbourne, Text Publishing (Another pioneering text, this broad account of its period includes a detailed account of the later years of the CAS with its new generation of modernists, together with the Reed’s pioneering Museum of Modern Art and Design).

Michael, L. (ed.) (2011) *The Heide Collection*, Melbourne: Heide Museum of Modern Art. (A series of essays on the evolution of the current Heide Museum of Modern Art, together with discussions of numerous key works from the collection).

Reid, B & Underhill, N (2001) *Letters of John Reed: defining Australian cultural life 1920-1981*, Ringwood, Victoria, Viking (In the absence of a biography of John Reed, this comprehensive edition of Reed’s correspondence provides considerable insight into his personal history and life in art).

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Illustrations

1. Sidney Nolan: *Rosa Mutabilis*, 1945 (Heide Museum of Modern Art Collection)

2. B & W photograph of Heide from the front c. 1936 (State Library of Victoria) – see image in Janine Burke, *The Heart Garden* (2004), illustrations following p. 56