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| Beckett, Clarice Marjoribanks (1887-1935) |
| **[Enter any *variant forms* of your headword – OPTIONAL]** |
| Clarice Beckett was a major Australian artist, and remains an important figure in feminist history. Beckett’s abstracted impressionism, subtle colour harmonies, and ordered placement of compositional elements is considered quintessential to Australian modernism. In the early 1970s her proto-minimalist approach was likened to Mark Rothko. Her refined blurring of hues and para-futurist vision of industrialised cities broke with the predominately agrarian themes of 1920s Australian painting. Having never left Victoria for many years, her artistic vision was highly autonomous and self-reliant; locally available books and art instruction, for instance, provided her with theoretical and technical cross-references. While her own creativity was bounded by domestic routine, her works poetically transformed and transcended her local surroundings.  During the women’s liberation movement and second wave feminism of the 1970s, discussions framing Beckett as a self-driven cultural maverick trapped within a restrictive middle class family offered guidance and self-identification for many artists associated with each movement. While the narrative of Beckett’s artistic career stimulated substantial curatorial and scholarly interest in her work, the posthumous focus on her social standing and personal life risk undermining the artistic breadth and credibility she achieved during her lifetime. |
| Clarice Beckett was a major Australian artist, and an important figure in feminist history. Beckett’s abstracted impressionism, subtle colour harmonies, and ordered placement of compositional elements is considered quintessential to Australian modernism, and in the early 1970s her proto-minimalist approach was likened to Mark Rothko. Her refined blurring of hues and para-futurist vision of industrialised cities broke with the predominately agrarian themes of 1920s Australian painting. Having never left Victoria, her artistic vision was highly autonomous and self-reliant; locally available books and art instruction, for instance, provided her with theoretical and technical cross-references. While her own creativity was bounded by domestic routine, her works poetically transformed and transcended her local surroundings.  During the women’s liberation movement and second wave feminism of the 1970s, discussions framing Beckett as a self-driven cultural maverick trapped within a restrictive middle class family offered guidance and self-identification for many artists associated with each movement. While the narrative of Beckett’s artistic career stimulated substantial curatorial and scholarly interest in her work, the posthumous focus on her social standing and personal life risk undermining the artistic breadth and credibility she achieved during her lifetime.  Image: tram.jpg  Figure Clarice Beckett, *Passing Trams*, c. 1931, oil on board, 62.8 x 58.7 cm, Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide.  <http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/c/c8/Beckett%2C_Clarice_-_Passing_Trams%2C_1931.jpg>  Beckett’s overbearing and controlling family took social status, class, and outward convention seriously. As the unmarried daughter of the family, Clarice bore the brunt of household duties. Her father discouraged visitors, and did not permit Beckett to have her own studio. As such, Beckett painted *en plein air* and created small scale, easily transportable works. Despite her restrictive upbringing, Beckett’s mother ensured that her daughter received the most comprehensive liberal humanities education that was available to women in twentieth-century Australia. Beckett was exposed to and intensively read visionary poets including Walt Whitman and W. B. Yeats, which fostered a sense of the creative artist’s responsibilities in Beckett, as well as an understanding of non-Western belief systems including Theosophy.  Beckett’s works garnered the favourable attention of artists including Walter Withers and Ola Cohn, who persuaded Beckett’s parents to allow her to receive professional art training. Beckett enrolled at the National Gallery School in Melbourne from 1914 to 1916. The silvery landscape tonalities of painter and teacher Frederick McCubbin were an inspiration for Beckett, and she reinterpreted them with a rigorous sense of formalism. Seeking an alternative to a traditional *beaux arts* education, Beckett turned to Max Meldrum, whose works combined the Edwardian enthusiasm for a Velazquez and Manet-derived tonalism with the analytical discipline of the sciences (specifically, optics and visual perception). While Beckett only studied with Meldrum for one year, she sought Meldrum’s opinion on her completed works throughout her career. As for Meldrum, he regarded Beckett as an outstanding pupil and an exceptional artist.  Beckett’s first substantial public showing occurred during Meldrum’s annual exhibitions of works by his students and friends. Beckett became increasingly prolific, and she held annual solo exhibitions from 1923 to 1933. Critical reception of her works was mixed: her suppression of detail garnered much criticism, and much of her work was deemed vague and unfinished. While Beckett herself was fascinated by the artistic results of painting works in imperfect weather conditions with muted visibility, many critics considered her creative style outlandish and irregular. Archival materials reveal, however, that Beckett received more respect from colleagues in professional and literary circles than is often historically assumed.  As European and American modernisms increasingly circulated throughout 1930s Melbourne, Beckett’s palette became brighter, and she began emphasising surface patterning opposed to realistic renderings of planes and tones (an artistic shift marking a move away from empiricism within her works). The worsening health of Beckett’s mother, however, curtailed the artist’s productivity, and she was increasingly consumed by domestic duties. Unable to recover from a bout of pneumonia, which she caught while painting in a storm, Beckett died in 1935. |
| Further reading:  (Hollinrake)  (Hollinrake, Clarice Beckett: Politically Incorrect)  (Hylton)  (Lock-Weir)  (McGuire) |