

Framing Clarice Beckett

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Clarice Beckett was very particular about her frames. She didn't like ornate, heavy, decorated frames. The ones she used had a double moulded ridge, characteristic of the 1920's; they were either gilded or whitewashed, but the only decoration she allowed was a little strap or ribbon, running diagonally along the seam in each corner, or a leaf, or occasionally a scallop. One of the pleasures of the exhibition that toured Australia in 1999 was that most of the paintings were still in the frames she gave them.

This might seem a minor point, directing our eye outside the painting, but frames – which we usually don't 'see' unless they intrude in some way and demand our attention – hold the picture in so that it exists on its own terms, not as a description of the world outside, but as an image, or a metaphor, or a reverie. The conventional wisdom is that the content of a painting should not extend into the frame in case it forms a little bridge into that disturbing external reality and breaks the autonomy of the image.

In Clarice Beckett's painting a lot tends to happen on the edge, right up against the frame. Roads and lines of trees or telegraph poles take our eye to the frame as if we could break free of its constraints. People walk off the edges of the paintings; cars are cut by the frame as they sink out of sight. Far from this being the sort of mistake critics once complained about, Clarice Beckett is often at her best when she teases us with a gesture towards the outside of the frame. Her aim, she said, was to give 'as nearly as possible an exact illusion of reality', and as we know, in 'reality' people do walk in and out of the frame, and things don't compose themselves for a painting, nicely grouped without anyone intruding or trailing away.

By coming to her art with the aim of creating not only an illusion, *but an exact illusion*, it is not so surprising that Clarice Beckett was highly sensitive to the framing of her paintings, and that so many of her experiments took place along their edges. She often painted the same subject – landscapes, seascapes, beaches, bathing boxes, bridges, roads – with only the slightest change of aspect. Sometimes she changed her angle of vision by standing in a different place, but at other times she stayed in the same place and pulled in, or expanded, the frame.

There are two paintings of the same jetty on the bay at Beaumaris, and the same boatshed. They were painted a year apart, in 1928 and 1929. She stands in more or less the same spot, but in one we see the full length of the jetty and two rowing boats moored at its end. There is a figure in each boat, and two more leaning against the jetty rails. One of the boats is clipped by the edge of the frame, as is the boatshed on the other side; beyond them is the expanse of the bay and a sky barely distinguishable from water: a filmy grey wash. In the second, smaller painting – which she painted first – she only lets us see part of the jetty, and

this time it's a solitary early-morning figure that contemplates the day.

In the larger painting, the mood is expansive as the figures stand and the boats rock in the tranquillity that comes early in the morning, or again in the evening. In the smaller painting, the boatshed is bolder, and the tree that appears in the larger composition as the merest wisp, acts as another frame – or the hint of another frame – as we look out to the bay. In this way the composition is held more tightly inside the framed space of the painting, while at the same time the clipped jetty draws our eye out in a contrary move towards the mysterious and uncertain world beyond the frame. It's a tenser, tauter image; less dreamy, and less comfortable. It's this tension that makes a painting by Clarice Beckett immediately recognisable: the mark of a sensibility content to contemplate the moment, and yet profoundly aware of the unseen, unknown possibilities that lie beyond her easel.

Take her roads. These are the paintings she has become quietly famous for. Percy Leason, an artist-contemporary of hers, and possibly, briefly, a lover, said that she made 'the tarred road artistically respectable'. She also transformed it into a metaphor. Her roads wind across the canvas and curve out of sight, disappearing into the frame. At times it seems that she, and we with her, are standing so close to the road's edge that the car is coming straight for us, about to drive out through the front of the painting. In other paintings, like *Bay Road, Beaumaris*, which she painted in 1927, the cars disappear, with a smudge of the lucky passengers visible through the back window; they turn the corner, leaving us, like the artist, abandoned on the kerb. Solitariness becomes as much a part of the road as the tar.

This is even more the case in her evening and night-time paintings. The dark cars with their invisible passengers drive past, throwing up a spray of water – if you look carefully, you can see the smudge of white paint applied late to get this effect. In *Collins Street, Evening, 1931*, there is still a trace of light in a darkening sky. City lights arc across the painting, holding the composition together in an extraordinary curve, allowing the car, pressed up against the picture plane, to be cut by the frame, and a solitary figure to walk rapidly out of the right-hand side of the painting. The car and the figure are perfectly placed, neither in nor out. Mary Eagle has described one of the mistiest of her night-paintings, as 'Japanese in its selectivity, Whistlerian in atmospherics,' holding 'the balance between East and West.'

Looking at Clarice Beckett's paintings, the questions that arise for me have to do with these many edges: day and night, east and west, sky and sea. Why are her cars, her roads, disappearing? Why are there people walking out of the frame? Why does she paint, over and over, those liminal states between night and day, sea and sky? What was the nature of her fascination with the line of the frame?

As well as being particular about frames, Clarice Beckett was deliberate in the way she grouped her paintings. When she exhibited, which she did every year for a decade from 1923, she arranged them thematically – which was not the usual method of the time. A double line of images flowed into a single line, and then into a new series. 'She had this interesting idea,' one of her contemporaries said, 'that while each painting was complete, they could give each other something as well.' The critic Bruce James likens her paintings to musical phrases 'that build ... to a greater and more compelling whole'. Which is why, in his view, 'groups of Becketts can be so thunderous.' She said that her 'pictures like music should speak for themselves'.

In the retrospective exhibition that brought her to prominence, the impact of the gradual changes, the shifts and repetitions, the reiterated themes, was for me strangely paradoxical. Here was an artist who dedicated herself to an accurate rendering of the world as she saw it, and throughout her working life remained loyal to a teacher who was vehemently opposed to any subjectivity or personal expression in art. Yet her images are highly subjective and her vision as utterly personal as any of the moderns of the period. Her paintings of roads and beaches and bays not only make us see the world anew – as a good landscape should – but show us something essential of herself. When she spoke of 'an exact illusion of reality', which

reality did she mean? There is no line, no frame, to separate a landscape out there in the world where cars disappear round corners and men stand on jetties, from the inner landscape of the woman who paints.

With women painters particularly, it's often difficult to know how much to allow the condition of their lives to intrude into our view of their paintings. I saw the exhibition with a friend who knew something of her story but had seen little of her work. I found it almost impossible to look at the paintings without the shadow of loneliness and the limited circumstances of Clarice Beckett's life affecting my response; my friend sensed a vein of melancholy in the paintings, but didn't see limitation.

Born into comfortable circumstances in 1887, Clarice Beckett lived with her parents until her death in 1935. She made short visits to friends within Victoria, but beyond that she never travelled, and she never had her own studio. Her mother was a hobbyist painter and encouraged her daughter's interest in art. But her father was unsympathetic and ungenerous. In 1911, when he was still relatively young man, Joseph Beckett was moved to Bendigo from the Melbourne head office of the bank for which he worked. The reason is said to have been stress and unhappiness – which makes me wonder whether he was a man boxed into a life that didn't suit him and as a result resented in his daughter creative capacities that were absent in his own life. Was it a fear of his fragility that stopped his wife and daughter from standing up to him?

Clarice accepted his ruling against a studio – 'the kitchen table would do,' he said. She made herself a little cart and pulled her paints along behind her when she could escape the house early in the morning and again at dusk when her chores were done. If there's loneliness in her paintings and a kind of hankering as she watches the bus disappear without her, can we say that this was the condition of her soul? Or even of her life? If she has figures walking out of the frame, is it because she knew what it was to live within tight, unyielding boundaries? My companion at the exhibition pointed to the full realisation of the images, and to the concentration that went into every slight but shifting difference of view. More sympathetic to virtues of limitation (if limitation it was), he saw a meditative quality, and a deliberate detachment. How else did she come to see the suburban road with such potency? I had no difficulty in seeing how much she did with a limited environment, but for me the misty tones of her roads held the shadow not only of her father, but of her teacher Max Meldrum.

It was from Meldrum that she got that tonal palette. He opened his art school in Melbourne in 1917, and was a popular teacher during the 1920s; he stood for the professionalism of art, was intensely sectarian and based his teaching on a much-touted 'science of perception'. He loathed modern art, and regarded as decadent its geometric forms, its individual expression and its clarified colour. He insisted that form and mass were to be rendered by tone alone – a kind of squinting view of the world, in the service of which he instructed his students to see shape and light through half-closed eyes. He was antagonistic to any breach of his method. There are small unframed works by Clarice Beckett in the National Gallery in Canberra, and on the back of them are the marks he gave her: A, B or C. This was, apparently, his common practice, but it doesn't endear him to someone like me finding them seventy years later. Nor do his remarks about the inability of women to paint – ironically for the reason that they are no good at being alone.

But it's also clear that Meldrum backed Clarice Beckett and saw her generously. The painter Jock Frater tells the story of a group of students mocking her canvases, 'capering about and shrieking "there's nought in them"', until Meldrum came in and 'went berserk telling them they wouldn't know the makings of a great painting if they fell over one'. On another occasion Frater talks of Meldrum admiring a group of paintings she'd left at the school: 'cars on the wet road, petrol pumps,' he wrote, 'all those subjects she did, and that got them all going and out they all raced, and they all started painting dozens of cars and city streets ... It was terribly funny to watch, but the jealousy the lassie had over the years, oh it was terrible...'

Meldrum offered Clarice Beckett an endorsement and the kind of paternal concern that was absent in her personal life. 'She worked like a man,' he said. She accepted his patronage, and to a considerable extent there was a happy congruence between his approach and her own idiom, but she pushed his theories as far as she could without alienating a man who became known as 'the mad Mullah'. To me, her edges point to a deeper ambivalence, traces of a desire to escape the frame even as she was held so well within it. And, as Rosalind Hollinrake points out in the catalogue essay that accompanied the retrospective, she didn't rely on Meldrum's group shows but doggedly set up exhibitions of her own, each year for a decade. There she was unprotected.

In the 1920s, when Clarice Beckett first began exhibiting, there were few critics who could understand her. She suffered the dismissive and ignorant reviews that were the lot of many artists who were women, and she was sometimes caught in factional cross-fire of criticism directed as much at Meldrum as at her. But for the most part she was passed over without comment. So much so that by the 1960's when Rosalind Hollinrake first came across her, Sidney Nolan almost convinced her that the mysterious 'C. Beckett' was an American, not Australian at all.

With the 1999 retrospective exhibition, which Hollinrake curated, our late-century critics were more circumspect. No one could be unaffected by the story of her two thousand canvases rotting in an open barn until Rosalind Hollinrake was shown them by Clarice's sister Hilda, and rescued the few that could be salvaged. Nevertheless, while her achievement is now recognised, there are still critics who respond to the limitation in comments that say in one way or another that Clarice Beckett didn't develop. There *is* development in her work if you look long enough to see it, but it's movement that blends into repetition, and here strength and weakness lie close to each other. The paradox of Clarice Beckett's work isn't that limitation and achievement are two sides of the same coin so your view of her depends on which side of the coin you wish to see. Rather, both are held in everything she did – in the individual images and in the sweep of paintings – so that the achievement lies in the limitation, and her capacity to embrace it.

Right at the end, in 1932 and 1933, there was a move that had to do with colour, as well as with those edges. The perfectly placed figures in *The Sandbank* are enjoying themselves, aware of each other rather than making their way out of the frame. In *Sandringham Beach* the bathing boxes are solid, their colour is bright and convincing; the figures walk purposefully, pulled inwards rather than outwards. On that sunlit beach no one is cut off. Despite the bright light, there is nothing squinty-eyed about this painting. It stands as a kind of herald.

But whatever it was, it never came, for in the following year Clarice Beckett's mother died, and she was left alone with her father. He closed the door on an artist-friend who came to inquire after her. A year later she caught a chill while she was out painting one evening, and when it developed into pneumonia, her doctor's opinion was that she made no effort to struggle for life. She died on 6 July 1935, at the age of forty-seven.

This death has been used (including by me) as an exemplum of the limitations our culture has placed on the woman as artist. But when you look at her work long enough, her play between inside and outside, and the acuity of her sensitivity to the frame, open a space for the viewer, a *space between*, that is almost nuptial in its balance. This is what remains.

All quotations are taken from Rosalind Hollinrake, *Clarice Beckett: Politically Incorrect*, exhibition catalogue, Ian Potter Museum of Art, The University of Melbourne, 1999