

Clarice Beckett: At the Edge

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Clarice Beckett liked to paint along the edge of the shore: sand and water, boat and jetty, cliff and bay. She painted early in the morning and again in the evening, at the edge of the day when shadows were long and the light diffuse. There were practical, domestic reasons for both these choices, rehearsed in every telling of Clarice Beckett, the artist who lived with her parents in the Melbourne beach suburb of Beaumaris. As the unmarried daughter, domestic care of her aging parents fell to her, limiting the work of her art to the time and the place of her circumstances. It wasn't until she was 27 that her father allowed her, in 1914, to attend the Victorian National Gallery School, and even then she was to be chaperoned by her sister Hilda. The freedoms of travel and study in Europe that opened for other women painting in the years between the wars were not for Clarice Beckett. She never travelled beyond Victoria; she did not even have her own studio. Her father had ruled that 'the kitchen table would do'. But for an artist as serious as Clarice Beckett it did not do, which is why, early each morning and again in the evening, before and after the duties of the day, she set out for the streets and beaches within walking distance of the house, pulling behind her a small cart for her paints, with a lid that served as an easel for her smaller paintings.

The paradox of Clarice Beckett is that while she worked under limitations that are painful to contemplate from the perspective of now, she herself did not feel the limitation - at least not, as far as we know, in terms of her art. Domestically she felt it acutely, but as an artist she made those many edges her own. 'Why would I wish to go somewhere else strange,' she is reported to have said, 'I've only just got the hang of painting Beaumaris.' Her move, in 1917, from the Gallery School to study with the tonalist Max Meldrum - disliked by both traditionalists and modernists - put her on another edge. From him, she learned a theory of colour tones as a technique for capturing 'an exact illusion of reality', pushing way beyond the limitations of his misty atmospherics into her own distinctive idiom. She engaged poetically with the ambiguity of 'exact illusion', which Meldrum meant all too literally.

In 1923, she established her independence as an artist with an exhibition of her work at the Athenaeum Galleries in Collins Street, Melbourne. She booked the space and hung the show herself. It was a bold move for an artist who had until then shown only in group-shows dominated by Meldrum, and it became the first of the annual exhibitions she held until 1933, two years before her death. Almost all the

paintings she showed over those years were land or seascapes, and though these rarely sold – her few still-lives were preferred - she knew that it was with them, as she put it to her sister Hilda Mangan, that she was 'on to something.'

What she thought that 'something' was, we don't know. When she died in 1935 at the age of 47, she left no paper trail of diary, or written explanation. Her paintings languished in a barn in rural Victoria – where only half survived the possums and the weather – and it was not until the 1970s when Rosalind Hollinrake began the work of restoring her to view that her surviving contemporaries were interviewed for their recollections. From them, we know that Clarice Beckett gave a lot of thought and attention to the way she hung those shows. 'There was always this strong rhythm' in her paintings, the artist William Frater told Hollinrake, 'and she grouped them in themes which was quite different from the usual way artists hung their paintings.' From John Farmer we know that she hung them so that a double line of closely related images flowed into a single line, and then open out to a new series. 'She had this interesting idea,' Farmer said, 'that while each painting was complete, they could give each other something as well.'

In these suites of land and seascapes, often of the same of a similar scene, she explored the ambiguity of exactness and illusion, observing small changes in light and shadow, and experimenting with shifts in focus and angle. Over the course of that decade of exhibitions, she developed the style and sensibility for which she is now known as one of Australia's finest early modernists. Leaving Meldrum in her wake, she countered the over-diffuse limitations of his tonalism with a deft use of verticals; from the mid 1920s, trees and telegraph poles, boathouses and bathing huts, buses and roads, those recognisable tropes of her art, brought dynamism and a formal heft to the early washes of sea and sky. As to that 'something' she was on to, Hilda attributed the meditative quality of her landscapes to the influence of Theosophy. In the catalogue to the 1999 Retrospective that brought Clarice Beckett back into view, Hollinrake saw a clue in the lines marked in her copy of Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass: All truths wait in all things*.

This fine exhibition of paintings collected by the late Ruth Prowse, who first encountered Clarice Beckett through Rosalind Hollinrake in the 1970s, reminds us again of the achievement of a woman who refused the limitations that kept her at the edge of her society and was indeed on to something.