

Susan McCulloch : The Age 1 May 1986

Interview in connection with the exhibition "Moments out of Time – A Survey 1970-1985"

"Coming to terms with the familiar

For one whose earliest memories were of growing up in the Australian bush it has taken Michael Shannon some decades to come to terms with actually painting it. For many years he resisted the idea of a landscape without a focal point like a quarry, road or hill and preferred to concentrate on interiors and urban landscapes.

"I'd regarded the landscape as almost unpaintable for years unless there was some structure in it" he says. "But since I've been spending more time actually living in it again I'm finding I can finally paint the gum tree, clichéd though it may sound. To me this has been the most satisfying part of my work in the last five years."

Shannon, 58, was speaking of his latest work, some of which can be seen in a survey show now on at the RMIT Gallery. Called "Moments out of Time – A Survey 1970-1985" it consists of some forty works chosen by him and presented by his commercial gallery, Powell St, which will also send the show to the Art Gallery of New South Wales, several regional Victorian Galleries and the Tasmanian gallery.

We spoke the morning after a very successful opening of the show where hundreds of friends had gathered to wish him well and Shannon was now back in the solitude of his noticeably tidy studio. He is an orderly man and feels slightly guilty at being such a meticulously neat painter. No chaos and confusion here.

His studio is obviously well and continually used but everything has its place; clean brushes neatly clumped in jars, paints clearly marked, canvases stored in well-defined storage compartments. He works on one canvas at a time finishing it completely before mapping out another.

His paintings, too, are somewhat meticulous and definitely well ordered. It is the visible that he is interested in capturing rather than the emotional or introverted.

"He records no great dramas, no violence and no emotional interplay of any kind," writes Graeme Sturgeon in his catalogue essay accompanying the exhibition. "His attitude is one of detached observation. Psychological examination or angst-ridden introspection plays no part in Shannon's approach. His is an art accessible to everyone, a consumable art, an art for the amateur art lover as well as the professional."

Shannon's work is difficult to place in the spectrum of Australian art. Almost a realist painter, he is not the innovator that were so many of his contemporaries such as Boyd, Nolan or Brack. But neither is he a mere literal recorder of landscape and object.

The most striking and distinctive aspect of his work is the perspectives he uses to capture an urban or country landscape, bringing to these an endless, aerial-like all-encompassing view.

There is gentleness and lyricism too. "I would really like to bring back into the landscape some sense of domesticity, understanding, a sympathy and warmth and some place where the landscape is liveable rather than harsh, cruel and forbidding," he says in the catalogue.

Shannon first turned to serious art study when a student in Adelaide in his late teens. Jeffrey Smart, who was then a young art lecturer, suggested Shannon go on to further study and suggested the school attached to the National Gallery of Victoria, then run by Sir William Dargie.

"It took me until about the age of 30 to let my own style settle and develop properly. Before that the work was much more confused. I used to admire painters like Graham Sutherland and Buffet but now my work is nothing like that."

Shannon was among the first of the Australian painters to treat urban landscapes as subject matter, and here too he encompasses the overall rather than the detail.

"If you take a street scene or row of buildings it can get too bogged down in minutiae. When I'm driving sometimes I'll see the glimpse of a vista or a panorama opens up and I know I'll have to go back and capture it. I always get the overall impression first."

What does it feel like to see 15 years of ones work in one show?

"It can be rather disconcerting because I can see how similar some paintings are that I thought were quite different. When I'm working on something I frequently think "I've really come up with something new here," Now I look back on them and see that there are really great similarities in style and connection between works I'd thought unconnected."