

Douglas Green's contribution to Australian art seems deceptively brief. It occurred just after the Second World War when a spirited band of demobbed soldiers arrived at the National Gallery of Victoria's (NGV's) art school. (Forty-two of the fifty-nine new students in 1946 were ex-servicemen.) Unsurprisingly, many of the soldiers thought the instruction stifflingly dull, for it still followed the program set down in the 1890s. So it was that (Sgt) Doug Green and (Lt) John Brack cooked up a campaign of niggling and troublesome agitation for change. And it worked, with two progressive painters being appointed to the teaching staff.

This small victory was capped eighteen months later when Green entered the NGV's travelling prize. By now he was sharing a city studio with Grahame King, and it was there he painted *Second class*, 1947, which depicted the crammed interior of a suburban railway carriage at rush hour. Several of his chums (Brack, King, Helen Maudsley and Fred Williams) had posed for the piece, while the senior modernist George Bell gave technical advice on arranging the composition. Nowadays *Second class*, which is in the Warrnambool Art Gallery's collection, seems an inoffensive piece indebted to the School of Paris. When it was first exhibited in 1947, however, it was considered raucously *moderne*, some viewers being shocked by the rounded modelling and everyday subject matter. Green took the prize, but not without a rumpus, conservatives declaring that the NGV had gone to the dogs.

Green was soon off to England, where he found accommodation at The Abbey Art Centre, a hostel in New Barnet, Hertfordshire. In retrospect this rundown mansion on the



DOUGLAS GREEN, *Second class*, 1947, oil on canvas, 95 x 151.5 cm, Warrnambool Art Gallery, Victoria.

outskirts of London was the seedbed for much postwar Australian art. James Gleeson and Robert Klippel were already residents, and within eighteen months Noel Counihan, Bernard Smith, Leonard French and Stacha Halpern would also take rooms there. A German sculptor named Inge Neufeld was another tenant (she subsequently married Grahame King), while assorted artists including Albert Tucker, Michael Shannon and Alan McCulloch visited to look up friends when in London. Clearly, Green was at the centre of things, rubbing shoulders with the best of the next artistic wave.

The early 1950s saw him return to Melbourne. After a period struggling to survive as a graphic designer, Green became an art teacher. He kept painting, of course, placing a diminishing number of works in modest shows here and there, but that was about it. Like so many celebrated prize-winners, early signs of promise had not flowed directly into a career of national distinction.

That is not to say that art had completely played him out. It was to be a thirty year wait, yet the results were rewarding when

Douglas Green eventually re-emerged at Melbourne's prestigious Pinacotheca gallery in the 1980s. Working with pencil, ink and gouache on paper, his lovingly crafted close-ups of foliage and natural debris on the bush floor seemed very much in step with the times, being admired by younger artists and viewers committed to environmental values.

The new work was hard to place stylistically within Australian art, for it had come from a long absorbing study of oriental art, especially

*shanshui* drawings of the Sung Dynasty. Indeed, Green had settled into the contemplative habits of a Chinese scholar-artist, not just in valuing the simple yet sincere creative gesture over the loud visual statement, but in the daily pattern of his increasingly reclusive life.

This outlook was most pronounced in two humble yet moving installations where the artist emptied the gallery of distractions, darkened the lighting and exhibited a set of painted scrolls on one wall. The first show represented seasonal views of massed clouds illuminated by sunset over Port Phillip Bay; and the second, the glorious dawn sky viewed from the bush near rural Castlemaine, where the artist had retired. Green did not exhibit in Melbourne again, although several curators managed to prise out of him individual pieces from a series of ravishingly crafted coloured drawings that absorbed his energies over the last decade. Taking a dead mistletoe as the subject, each work visibly seemed to encapsulate a lifetime's concerns and feelings, from a deep reverence for nature through to a fear that western culture may be a deadening parasitic growth.

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