

panorama



Official Newsletter of Brighton Art Society Inc.

Issue
355
May

FROM THE PRESIDENT

Dear BAS members,

Enrolment in Tutored Classes for Term two has generally been strong and the classes are now settling in again after the break.

A couple of people have asked about whether it would be possible to again get tea and coffee from the studio kitchen. The Committee had considered this and decided that for the time being, it is best if people continue to bring their own refreshments if they wish to have them. This limits the shared handling of containers and ingredients and also the likelihood of too many people gathering in the kitchen's confined space. If you wish to use the hot water from the kitchen urn, that's fine if you have your own cup and ingredients.

This month's main article, was submitted by member Eddie Moses. It is always good to get input in the newsletter from the wider membership, so if you have something you'd like to share, please feel relaxed about doing so. Don't forget either, that the BAS Facebook page is now up and running, so that's another way to share with the group.

It doesn't have to involve lengthy writing. I happen to enjoy that and it helps me to think through the response I've had to a given topic. However, I understand it's not everyone's idea of a good time. A picture or two with some explanatory text on an art related topic of interest is fine. Might involve your own work or something you've seen and been engaged by. Don't be shy!

LYNTON DAEHLI

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WHAT IS THEME AS OPPOSED TO CONTENT IN ART?

AN EXPLORATION by Eddie Moses



Salome with the Head of John the Baptist - 1607 - Caravaggio

Put simply, **Content** is what the work is about. It is the story of the work. So Caravaggio's *Salome with the Head of John the Baptist*, pictured here, is about the beheading of John the Baptist.

Theme is an idea or point that is central to a story – or what the author is trying to say.

It can often be summed up in a single word, for example, love, death, betrayal. Typical examples of themes of this type are conflict between the individual and society; coming of age; humans in conflict with technology; nostalgia; the dangers of unchecked ambition (e.g. *Macbeth*); loneliness (e.g. John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*). In simple terms, what is this painting/film/novel trying to say? Conflict between individuals/humankind and technology/countries; the coming of age; unchecked ambition; unrequited love, etc.

A theme is not the same as the content or subject of a work. For example, the *subject* of *Star Wars* is: the battle for control of the galaxy between the Galactic Empire and the Rebel Alliance. The *themes* explored in the films might be "moral ambiguity" or "the conflict between technology and nature".

Theme is usually about life, society or human nature, but can be about any other subject. Themes are the fundamental and often universal ideas explored in a work. Themes are usually implied rather than explicitly stated. Deep thematic content is not required in a work, but the great majority of powerful works have some kind of thematic content. Content is descriptive – it is what the work is about. It is the story of the work. So **Caravaggio's *Salome with the Head of John the Baptist*** is about the beheading of John the Baptist.

In the painting, Salome seems unmoved. The executioner appears detached. Is he like those who do what the rich and powerful require of him, without question, but not without his own opinion? His expression hints, if anything, of compassion.

The old woman, almost disembodied in the shadowy background, is a disengaged onlooker, a sister to the Greek chorus. She clasps her raised hands in dismay, but she feels helpless and her disavowal of the execution is as wraithlike as her presence.

If their attitudes are not quite casual, Caravaggio has allowed none of them to convey any adequate sense of the magnitude of the crime that has been committed. It is a paradoxical image. What makes it most disturbing is the inconsequentiality of the responses: Salome callous, the executioner hardened, and the old woman too defeated to assert any substantial moral presence. There remains only the tragic pathos of Saint John's pallid face. The content is the placing of the martyr's head on the platter; the theme is the heedlessness, the disengagement by the three parties in the painting – Salome, the man and the old woman.

Caravaggio's painting is like a movie close-up, focusing on the essential elements and excluding all others. It has turned the narrative description of the process of the martyrdom (**the content**) into a psychological study of its protagonists, and through them into a sad commentary on human heedlessness, - so **its theme** is one of human heedlessness expressed in the lack of compassionate reaction to the beheading of a man. The painting is not just a depiction of an image (ie, the martyr's head placed on a platter) – it is that but Caravaggio has also transformed the subject from a kind of fable into a disquieting actuality of human heedlessness.



Collins Street, 5 pm - 1955 - John Brack

This painting depicts office workers walking in rush hour along busy Collins Street in Melbourne's CBD after finishing work for the day – this is its **content** or story.

As we look at it, we can see that the office workers have blank mask-like faces and they are arranged in orderly military-like lines, perhaps resembling troops marching. The work was painted shortly after the Korean War in which Australian troops participated and this was also the era of the Cold War between USSR and the West, where the threat of nuclear attack was constantly imminent. These are underlying messages in the painting – the inhumanity of the people portrayed, the sameness and lack of colour in their lives, the absence of joy and mirth, the corpse-like orderly figures in the background, the rigid lines of the city buildings, the absence of nature (save for one dark geometric tree), the joyless faces. The people portrayed don't really appear human – they are alienated, simplified, stark, shapes surrounded by areas of deliberately drab colour, often featuring large areas of brown and grey.

So while the content of Brack's *Collins St, 5pm* is office workers walking along a busy city street at rush hour, the theme of the work is the conformity, the lack of humanity in the everyday life of city workers.

It's all very well to look at such sharply themed works as *Salome* and *Collins St*. But what about softer-themed work. Let's say for example, a painting about nature, such as Van Gogh's: *Wheat-fields with Crows*



Wheat-fields with Crows - 1890 - Vincent Van Gogh

Van Gogh did want his wheat-fields under stormy skies to express 'sadness and extreme loneliness', but at the same time he wanted to show what he considered in his own words was 'healthy and fortifying about nature'.

The rich blues, yellows and greens in the painting reflect the colourfulness of nature, while the turbulence of the brushwork recall movement, wind and the power of the natural world. In contrast to the turbulence of the painter's expression, the whole space is one of primordial breadth and simplicity. The broad open spaces of field and sky are dotted with flying crows and lined with paths created by the hand of humans. Nature and humankind seem to be in a moving harmony with each other. So while the **content** of the painting is wheat-fields and crows, its underlying **theme** appears to be one of harmony between the human and natural worlds.

In my opinion whether they be poems, novels, sculptures or paintings the great works of art are distinguished not just by their content/story/subject but by their underlying theme – what has the artist to say about his/her world?

EDDIE MOSES

SATURDAY PORTRAIT PAINTING

The long running untutored portrait painting/drawing session, which runs at the studio on Saturday afternoon between 2 - 4 pm, will resume on Saturday March 6th.

The pose is set for 3 weeks, so there is plenty of time to develop your picture. The atmosphere is friendly and relaxed and all BAS members are welcome.

The Convenor of the session is **Ann Black**. If you are interested, Ann will be happy to hear from you on:
9598 7626

YOU'RE INVITED



BAYSIDE ACQUISITIVE ART PRIZE
14 MAY-4 JULY 2021

BACC GALLERY

Downstairs from the BAS studio is the Gallery space run by the Bayside Council. I'm sure many of us pay it a visit when we are coming or going from our classes. The exhibition titled: Her Own Path, which featured an interesting collection of work from the early C20th, by women associated with the Bayside area, has just closed, but for those who managed it, was well worth a look.

May 14th, will see the opening of the annual Bayside Acquisitive Prize. Amongst the entrants is our tutor Michelle Zuccolo. At \$15,000, the prize is valuable and although the inclusions can at times be controversial, it is always worth a visit. The show will remain on until July 4th, so make a note to visit.

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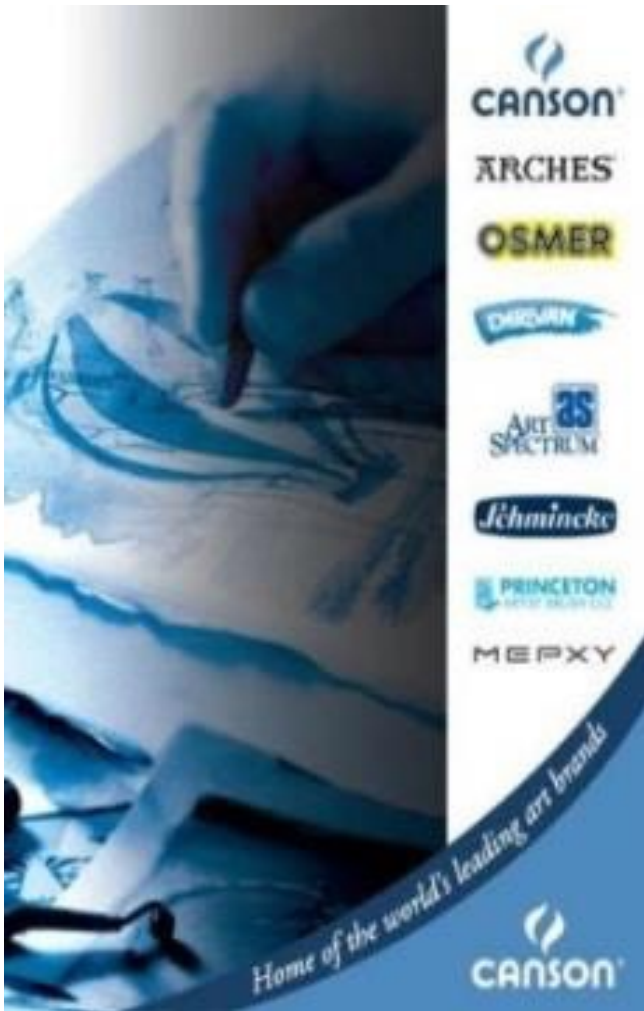
Simone supports The Brighton Art Society

I would love to hear from anyone who has questions about preparing to sell, or who simply would be interested in a discreet chat about how this current market has affected their property value.

Call me on 0403 857 266 to book a confidential, no-obligation chat.




Simone Chin
Licensed Estate Agent and Auctioneer



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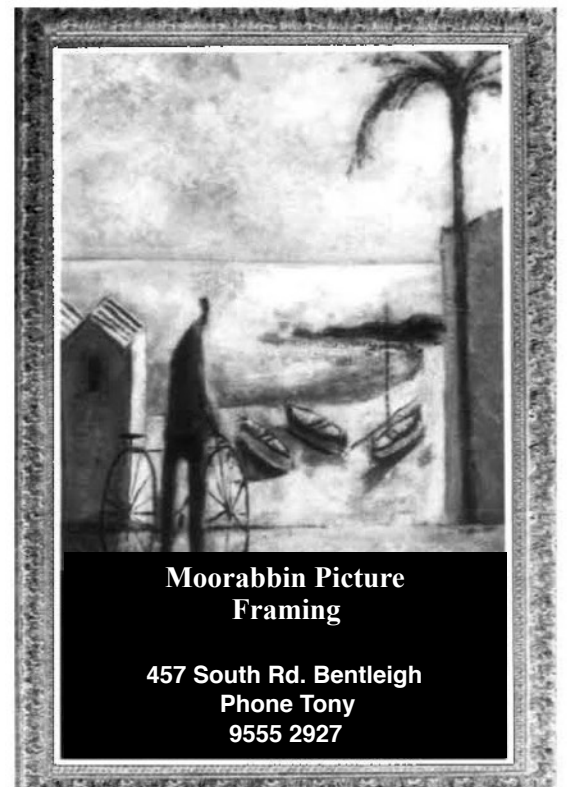
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BAS OFFICE 9553 8506

Dates to remember:

TERM TWO - Monday April 26th - Friday June 25th

SATURDAY PORTRAIT GROUP - every Saturday from 2-4pm.

THURSDAY PORTRAIT GROUP - every Thursday from 4-7pm

Both groups are untutored and hold a single pose for three weeks. Attendance is on a casual basis and the atmosphere is always relaxed and friendly.

brightonartsociety@icloud.co