

## BARRY DICKINS, THE ANGEL OF EPPING MADE MANIFEST IN THE SUN NEWS PICTORIAL

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*"People are my palette.....I love the useless"*

Barry Dickins has an established reputation as a playwright, essayist, satirist and cartoonist but over the last decade he has realised his long held passion to be a painter. It coincides with his research into the life and work of two Australian artists he admires but more significantly, I believe, is a result of this settled happy phase of his life heralded by the birth his son in 1995. He started drawing again, drawing seriously after a long absence. Declaring himself a painter soon after becoming a father has a rightness and fruition about it. To his painting he brings the same sensibility, that was always there in the pathos and love for his great tragic theatrical creations, Minnie Moscovitz, in ***The Death of Minnie***, Lennie Lower in ***Lonely Lennie Lower***, the old vaudevillians of ***The Foolshoe Hotel*** or the hanged man, in ***Remember Ronald Ryan***.

In 2002, Dickins wrote an appreciation of Brett Whiteley, and he has a book on Charles Blackman due for publication in 2008. He clearly loves Whiteley's easy fine line, cherishes the feeling in Blackman's work, and is enthralled by the wicked smile, childlike eye and knowing whimsy of Mirka Mora. Dickins absorbs and pays homage to all three antipodeans but also to Redon, Matisse, Chagall and Picasso. He is a paradox; resolutely local, passionately parochial and yet he always saw himself as a citizen of the world of art and literature.

In ***The Gift of the Gab***, he is berated for his high brow aspirations, *"You're not Dylan Thomas, this is Reservoir"*, or *"burning to become Monet and stuck at Truth"*, invariably here and wanting to be a part of there, *"stuck in Reservoir dreaming of Cairo"*. In the book, there is a poignant photo of Dickins in 1970 aged twenty one posed in the backyard beside a Blackmanesque painting of a woman holding a bunch of flowers; the knees are out of his jeans and there's a hole in his jumper but he looks young, handsome and hopeful full of pride in his art but underneath in Dickins' own inimitable script it says *"You're not Dylan Thomas And You can't paint for NUTS!"* So it can only be by way of a miracle that he overcame such early setbacks to become the Redon of Ruthven, the Mora of Reservoir, the Whiteley of Northcote, the Matisse of Merrilands, the Chagall of Keon Park, the Picasso of Preston and the Blackman of Thornbury as well as the Poet Laureate of Northlands and Bard of Regent, and the creator of the ongoing Homeric epic of Epping.

*"My life is art and my future is Thornbury. I like Thornbury the poor man's Northcote ... I grew up in the Northern end of Reservoir, the sub tropical end of Keon Park in fact.. Regent always sounds a bit flasher than Reservoir my birthplace."* In his earliest plays, and his novel, ***The Crookes of Epping***, Dickins satirised his thwarted dreams of being a painter under the guise of lampooning the art establishment: *"You must come to terms, just as the misguided Streeton did, that skill is not everything. Even Leonardo Da Vinci had to leave Geelong"* - Robert Fumes, THE ART CRITIC.

Although he ultimately studied Art at Preston Tech under Brian Seidel, Dickins is clear that what he hadn't already learnt from his father by the age of fifteen, he learnt the rest-*"all there is to know about painting techniques"* at Channel Seven as an apprentice set painter. While still working there, he made a pen and ink drawing from life.

*"I drew an old woman who was resting upon a public bench next to the GPO in Bourke Street. I drew her in secret for she was possessed of the most serene face I had ever seen- possibly with the exception of my mother – and later in my boarding-house rooms I drew her again in Windsor and Newton Artists' quality sepia ink and used a beautiful Gillette mapping pen –you had to use a match to burn the black wax off their incredibly delicate easily broken nibs. I put this little picture up for sale in Chapel Street, Praharan and to my surprise it sold . That was my first taste of success in exhibiting."*

The serene face of the woman who inspired his first drawing is still there in Barry Dickins' paintings. She is the lovely face of his darling mother, his beloved Nan, his adored wife and his doted on late won son, Louis the Sun King of his life. Such serenity is calm and still, it neither shakes nor breaks but smiles quietly, silently almost to itself, its mouth is a moon lying down, it does not bare its teeth, and its eyes are clear and bright, not wet with tears; this serenity, this image of bliss and love is everything Dickins has yearned for throughout his life. Its line is smooth sensuous, unbroken, a dancing gesture, free and confident which completes its arc, rests and takes a bow. Colour amplifies and celebrates the line, in flags and bunting handkerchiefs and tablecloths, diamonds and squares, pinks, yellows, blues.

In Dickins' other art, his drawing and cartooning, there is another face in Dickins' art it is usually masculine usually in profile and is sad overwrought and overcome, it rides a bike, but is so out of puff it needs pumping up, it has tombstone teeth ridiculous hair or an absurd beanie, or no teeth whatever and a chooks bum mouth, the scratchiness of pen and ink suits it, nibs break and ink splats, the line is fidgety and full of dubious detail, it can't stop itself, it strays into the extraneous, it makes a virtue of excess, it is obsessive. It can't stop joking, veering off into bad taste, incorrect behaviour, spleen, gratuitousness, The line is crabby interrupted, savagely satirical in the vein of Searle or Petty. There is a vein of madness and unresolved anger running with the ink, it is not calm but it can be achingly funny, side-splitting, not serene at all.

*"I wanted to be an artist. Any kind. Not a dead kind. And it's a kind thing, Art and we all know what a hard trot it is".*

Like Leonardo and Streeton, Barry Dickins had to leave Regent, his birthplace and travel to the light at the other end of the Epping line to become an artist, and he has.

SUZANNE SPUNNER, January 2008

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## **BARRY DICKINS** WRITING WHICH INFORMED THIS WRITING

Mag and Bag: the Horror of the Suburban Nature Strip,1976

The Gift of the Gab :Stories from the Life of Barry Dickins , 1981

The Crookes of Epping ,1984

Green Room (The Art Critic)- short monologues , 1985

My Grandmother : A True Story, 1989

Articles of Light: Reflectiions on Lowlife, ratbags and angels ,2000

Black and Whiteley: Barry Dickins in search of Brett Whiteley,2002

and a loquacious letter from Dickins to the author purporting to be a cv, 2007

**SUZANNE SPUNNER** is a playwright and a writer on visual art. She met Barry Dickins at La Mama in 1976 when she was writing theatre reviews for *The Melbourne Times*. At the time Barry was writing and drawing cartoons about football for the paper. He called her his first visionary critic and claims she called him the Cezanne of the Pram Factory but that is not true, however it is true that before she met him, she thought Epping was merely a sausage.