

## ROVAY'S EYE

**Peter Beilharz**

Is Australia different? (why should it be?) Are we different? (why should we be?) Those who answer yes to questions like this sometimes base their view on culture, but more often on images of nature, ecology, land, place, landmass, continent. Sometimes we need to look different, or feel exceptional, especially when our friends in the north overlook us, or we just feel irrelevant. Those who answer no are more often given to thinking about the culture of everyday life. Most of us live in cities, and we have done this for a century. Our heads, or those of the advertisers and symbol makers may be in the outback, but ours are lives of concrete and asphalt. We are moderns, in this way of thinking, Europeans, Americans perhaps in our models of suburbia, which are often Californian. We are northerners in the south, antipodeans, one foot here, one there. These are positive, creative tensions; they do not prevent us from feeling at home in both north and south. The margin, after all, is our centre.

Is Australia then provincial? In some obvious sense, yes, historically constituted by empire, distant, originally derivative of Europe, culturally often given to mimesis or copying (though copying is also invariably creative). In some other strong senses, no. We are distant from the centres, but we have never been isolated. To the contrary, our cultures are globally constituted, constructed by maritime and cultural traffic, and then electronically. The edges also innovate, as anyone with a roving eye can tell.

I have spent the last decade or more thinking with Bernard Smith about questions like this. One result was a book called *Imagining the Antipodes*. But to think with Bernard Smith also means, at some point, thinking with Robert Hughes, which I have done more tentatively in a book called *Reflected Light*. Hughes demands our attention, not least in masterworks like *American Visions*; he takes the American turn more fully. Yet his celebrity status and

occasional notoriety, as well as the tragedy in his life also sense to leave his contribution intellectually undervalued. Hughes is interesting to think with for many reasons, including his views on provincialism.

It would be easy to mistake Hughes for a cultural cringer – after all, he chose the life of the expatriate, he left the provinces for the metropolis, Sydney for Manhattan. Yet he declares himself to be provincial, as though being an outsider confers advantage of perspective, or detachment (which possibly it does). Hughes has many interesting things to say about the provinces, not only Australia, but also his other provincial home, Spain, and especially Barcelona, about which he has written three books, all love letters, just as *American Visions* is his love letter to America. Home, as we shall see, perhaps needs no love letter; it is just there, the place that we come from, it need not elicit love or hatred, rather simply recognition.

The central issue here is that the provinces are culturally generative, even as the centres suck these energies in. Provincialism can cringe, but it can also have a kind of attitude or confidence that need not strut – take it or leave it. Thus Hughes quotes the famous and unique oath of allegiance sworn by the provincial Catalans and Aragonese to the Spanish monarch in Madrid: ‘we, who are as good as you, swear to you, who are no better than us, to accept you as our king and sovereign lord, provided you observe all our liberties and laws – but if not, not.’ There! The point is that we can be provincial without self-hatred. We can be of our place and cosmopolitan at the same time.

We can be free, in our heads, if we *choose* our cities or our country, and not only have them choose us, or have our history or parents choose our places or cities. We do not need to love our cities; but we need to embrace them, to feel both comfort and discomfort with them, in order to live productive and relatively sane lives within them.

Rachel Rovay and I have been following parallel paths across these years, and it gives me great pleasure to share in the launching of her latest exhibition. There are various points of contact between our projects and ways of thinking. Rovay's images speak to us because they are regional and global at the same time. In engaging with everyday life, with the city and its images and forms, with this comfort and discomfort she captures the particular in the universal (- or is it the other way around?) Hers are strong images, often suggestive of flat, hard surfaces, as though mosaic of the city. They work through movement, mediated by figures which are significant but also marginal. You can feel the presence of some obvious influences, north and south, Hopper, Brack, Arkley; Smart – and those who know her work will observe the continuity with its earlier techniques and locales. These are images that bend verticals, and offer still as well as movement, absence as well as presence. They capture something of us here, now, of our moment in a passing eternity.

Rachel Rovay's 'On The Move – The Place to Be' is at the Pollock Gallery, Richmond, 5-24 August. Peter Beilharz is Professor of Sociology and Director of the Thesis Eleven Centre at La Trobe University.