



# *Revel Cooper*

Curated by Dr. Julian Goddard

John Curtin Gallery

16 May – 6 July, 2014

## CURATORIAL NOTES

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Revel Cooper is best known as a member of the group of 'child artists of the Australian bush' from Carrolup in South-West Western Australia who came to public attention in the late 1940s and early 1950s through a series of exhibitions that gained recognition both in Australia and internationally. After leaving Carrolup as a teenager about 1951, Revel continued as an artist for the rest of his life, becoming known in Perth and Melbourne as an 'Aboriginal artist' well before the beginning of the huge growth in Indigenous art of the early 1980s. Revel's life was in many ways tragic; he spent nearly his entire adult years incarcerated and when not imprisoned he struggled with alcoholism. Despite this he maintained a steady production of paintings through which he gradually found his own voice. Indeed by the time of his violent death in 1983, he had developed a recognisable and influential style of painting which later coupled with an overtly political agenda in his thinking and expression.

This modest exhibition attempts to present Revel Cooper's artworks for consideration as that of a Noongar artist deeply embedded in his Country with an aspiration for a better understanding and appreciation of his people and their culture. While at times highly utopian, his celebration of Noongar/Aboriginal society and the land from which it comes stands counter to the prevailing racism of Australian society post World War II. While he shared this vision with some other members of the Carrolup group who also continued to paint after their school years, Revel's life and art has had a significant effect on at least two generations of Noongar artists who have followed him. The personal and social struggle to establish himself as an artist - speaking through his paintings about Noongar land and culture - set an example that continues to empower Noongar people and artists today and will continue to do so into the future. There is a sad irony in that through his imprisonment not only was Revel able to have the stability, materials and conditions to make art but he was also able to pass his techniques and style onto younger artists similarly incarcerated.

Revel Cooper was born in 1934 at Katanning, a small country town 270 kilometres south east of Perth. One of six children whose mother died when Revel was six years old, he was made a ward of the State and placed in the Carrolup Native Settlement just outside of Katanning. At Carrolup, Revel was one of a group of students under the charge of Noel and Lily White who encouraged the children to develop their creative skills including drawing and painting. Using the local bush and farms as subject matter, the school's children started by making landscape images that soon incorporated stories of corroborees and other cultural events. One common image from these early years is of the track/road leading out of the Settlement. This image - of a track or road receding into the background - was a pictorial device that Revel would use for the following 30 years. It is an image that he would elaborate to the point of becoming a motif with strong symbolic meaning of hope in an idealised beautiful landscape.

Between 1946 and 1952 Revel was included in an exceptional set of exhibitions of the artwork of the school children at Carrolup that travelled firstly to Perth, then onto New Zealand, the United Kingdom and the Netherlands. These exhibitions drew great attention with the children-artists being feted as geniuses and becoming local celebrities.

Revel probably left Carrolup within a year of it suddenly being closed in late 1950 and after it had been renamed the Marribank Agricultural School and spent time as a labourer and shearer around Katanning and Narrogin. In 1951 Revel was employed at 'Gibbneys' (J.Gibbney & Sons Pty Ltd), Perth's leading commercial art house as a junior (apprentice). Less than a year later in 1952, Revel was living at the Bassendean Native's Camp where he was charged with stealing and on 25 June he was fined 15 pounds for receiving liquor at Katanning. Far more consequentially for Revel, a few months later he was found guilty of manslaughter and interned in Fremantle Prison.

On the 26 November 1952, Revel aged 18, was sentenced to 4 years imprisonment for the manslaughter (he was charged with murder), outside of Narrogin, of a market gardener - a Chinese man in his late-seventies who it would appear was supplying Revel and others with alcohol. The circumstances of the man's death as told at the initial trial were confusing and conjectural, resulting in the jury being undecided as to the proof of guilt. However, the subsequent retrial ended with Revel being found guilty and subsequently sentenced. In his summing up of the trial Chief Justice Sir John Dwyer recommended Revel be sent to Pardelup Prison Farm in Mount Barker and is reported as saying Cooper's only trouble was a desire for alcohol and he hoped he would get a chance to develop his artistic ability. Instead of a prison farm Revel found himself incarcerated in the state's maximum-security facility - the gaol at Fremantle. However the judge's words were almost prophetic. By being sent to gaol Revel had access to the prison's art program and his art did indeed subsequently progress but alas alcohol would haunt Revel finally resulting in his own murder in 1983.

Fremantle Prison would become Revel's residence for most of the rest of his life and while it couldn't have been enjoyable, it did allow him to make art. In a drawing made in the prison probably in the early 1970s (*Today* Cat. 2) he seems to be questioning just who is incarcerated – the prisoners or their guards? Revel is sitting at his table painting while the guard sweeps the floor. In the background one of the other prisoners sings "please release me let me go" almost tongue-in-cheek.

Over three decades beginning in the early 1950s Revel develops two images that became signature paintings; an idealised landscape and night-time corroborees. While both have their genesis in the paintings and drawings he made at Carrolup as a child, these images were saleable and in demand from dealers and he refined them into symbolic narratives about Aboriginal/Noongar life.

Beginning when a student, Revel's landscapes idealise and celebrate the South-West as a place of peace and prosperity. *Contentment* (c1949 Cat.17), the large pastel made when he was about 15 years old at Carrolup, sets the agenda for a project carried over three decades. This is an early 'sunset painting' showing two kangaroos grazing in a park-like landscape of grass. The title of the work suggests a place of peace and ease, which is reflected in the image of the kangaroos enjoying a trouble-free environment. This feeling of serenity becomes the hallmark of these landscape works. They are redolent with sunshine and blue skies or dramatic theatrical sunsets. These garden-like images are often without people or animals but when people are shown they are always Aboriginals going about their everyday life: hunting, camping and playing. Images with animals – usually kangaroos – are also benign and depict a perfected idea of nature. The fit between people, animals and place is seamless; an Arcadian landscape devoid of conflict or want. The reality of life of the South-West – especially for Noongar people was of course anything but idyllic. The harsh conditions most Indigenous people lived

under make these paintings seem like a fantasy world for their lives were in the main far from peaceful. As such these images can be understood as hopeful and even utopian – images of a place that could be or once was.

Incorporated in many of Revel's landscapes (see *Bitumen Road* Cat. 28) is a road meandering from the foreground into the country and bush. This classic perspectival device is a way of creating deep space in a drawing or painting. As a child at Carrolup, Revel drew the track leading into the Settlement in this manner (*Untitled* Cat. 6, Cat. 13). As he continued to refine it as a pictorial device over many years it begins to take on symbolic meaning. The road or track takes us into the country – animating the bush around it. It becomes a sign of being in the country – of interacting with its beauty. It suggests a journey to come or to be made, with the reward of some unspecified but beautiful place usually signified by hills beyond in the distance.

Revel's earliest 'night-time-corroboree painting' in this exhibition (*Corroboree*, 1949, Cat. 9) is from his time at Carrolup and suggests the school kids there either saw a corroboree or were told stories about corroborees. The detail of the head dresses in this painting are not something a child would make up and the way the figures are scattered amongst the trees suggests the painting was not copied from a photograph. As with the landscape works, Revel would remake and refine this scene over many years eventually developing a standard format: night-time, in a clearing with a group of spectators looking on. The theatricality of the event becomes exaggerated with a curtain of trees as a backdrop and the participants adorned with very elaborate and stylised body markings and ceremonial head dresses.

Aboriginal people appear in many of Revel's paintings and drawings. From the earliest works to those of the 1970s they are shown living in and interacting with their environment – their Country. His commitment to celebrating Aboriginal/Noongar culture seems obvious when we consider the persistence of these images. People going about their everyday lives are shown from the earliest works of the late 1940s and continue through the rest of his production. Most of these images depict aspects of traditional life – something Revel probably never experienced – in an attempt to illustrate Aboriginal culture's history and its worthiness of acknowledgement.

Revel's time as a student at Carrolup under the tutorage of the Whites sustained his art practice throughout his life. Most of his paintings and drawings continue themes and images he first learnt as a school child, but he did develop a political voice in his later years with overt images of injustice such as a black Jesus crucified on a map of Australia (not in the exhibition), writing articles and appearing in documentaries about Aboriginal Land Rights. As Noongar culture reinstates its importance Revel Cooper's art stands as a significant document of resilience and hope.

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June 2014

