

Into Focus: Some thoughts on the Boyd women

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Women from the past emerge like apparitions. But if she is an artist, something else can be glimpsed: the tangible proof of an original mind. A painting, a drawing, a pot—all declare: 'I was here.'

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Emma Minnie Boyd was born in Naarm/Melbourne in 1858. She was artistic and religious, and enjoyed the good fortune of having a mother who championed her talents and a convict grandfather who had accrued a fortune. She also had the wisdom to fall in love with a fellow artist, Arthur Merric Boyd—someone who could understand what it was she was compelled to do: spin images from experience.

Despite the marginalisation of nineteenth-century women, Emma was no amateur. She trained for six years at the National Gallery of Victoria (NGV) Art School, studied privately under Louis Buvelot and exhibited regularly from 1874 to 1932—including at the Victorian Artists Society, the Centennial International Exhibition 1888–89, the Royal Academy of Arts in London and, with her husband, at the *Como* in Melbourne. She was the matri-

arch of what was to become a great Australian artistic dynasty. She was generous to a fault and endlessly encouraging of her children's imaginations; of the four who survived childhood, three (Merric, Penleigh and Helen) were to become artists and one (Martin) a writer.

In her family, not expressing yourself was unimaginable.

At first, Emma painted gentle scenes of home life: a girl, seated by the window or gazing into the distance; kittens playing, sunlight streaming. As her skills sharpened, her work became more complex: rich, detailed views of empty, atmospheric interiors; an old working-class couple, fragile in the snow, rendered with great dignity and compassion. At one point (the works are undated), Emma painted a series of tiny landscapes on leaves: worlds within worlds. Tracks, rivers, forests, sky: the residue of humans faintly apparent, but dominated by nature—to Emma's thinking, the evidence of God's presence. As she entered the twentieth century, her passion for shimmering gum trees and dappled light became clear. In a particularly powerful watercolour from the late 1890s she depicted a farmer tending to his cows: a small figure melding into the fields he knows



so well, the trees less objects than spectral visions. In another watercolour, this one from 1914, she went further: it's like seeing the reflection of the land in the surface of a pond. Colour is fluid, translucent, shifting; mood is privileged over detail; atmosphere reigns.

In the same year, Emma painted a rare and vivid portrait of her daughter-in-law Doris Boyd. In her white dress and hat, Doris is seated on the banks of the Yarra, drawing, her watercolour box beside her. She's concentrating on someone or something beyond the picture plane. Details of the landscape are vague: the intimation of a branch, an overcast sky, parched ground—everything recedes in the face of such intense focus. I wonder what Doris was sketching when Emma portrayed her so tenderly. An oil painting Doris made six years later is, perhaps, an indication: titled *Early Morning*, it's a study of a field and trees dissolving in the radiance of the dawn sun. I imagine the artist waking before her family and taking her paints outside for a rare moment of peace.

Like Emma, Doris, who was born in 1888, was trained professionally: she studied under Bernard Hall and Frederick McCubbin at the NGV Art School, where she met her future husband, Merric Boyd, who was to become a renowned ceramicist (Over the years, Doris decorated many of his pots with impressionistic drawings of the natural world and trekked across Melbourne selling his work). Both Emma and Doris were devoutly Christian but not rigid in their thinking. All of Doris's offspring were to become artists, too—the most famous, of course, is Arthur Boyd, whose wife, Yvonne, had also shown great promise when he met her at art classes. In the 1940s, Yvonne painted and drew lively portraits of people on the streets of Fitzroy and on a tram. In a wonderful etching from 1961, she portrayed her then-three-year-old daughter Lucy: the expressive face of the little girl, with her intense eyes, emerges from a maelstrom of lines, her hair as vivid as a tornado.

Arthur's older sister, Lucy, became a renowned potter, while the youngest in the family, Mary—a painter, photographer, ceramist and writer—like so many women, put her creativity on hold in order to support her artist husbands, John Perceval and then Sidney Nolan. Her talent is clear in *Hands*, which she created in 1942, when she was only sixteen. Painted in the midst of World War II, it's a raw howl in the dark: the face of a gender-ambiguous person with a wounded mouth and bony hands clasped together in prayer or supplication. Mary was to have four children with Perceval; all of them, too, became artists.

Despite juggling a million demands, Emma and Doris still managed to make their mark as artists. It's not



difficult to imagine that Emma's rare portrait is something of a homage to a fellow traveller: a reiteration of the challenges involved when a woman, especially one born in the nineteenth century, commits to a creative career alongside the pressures of her domestic life.

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It's important to stress that these fiercely creative and clever women were not aberrations. When the National Gallery Art School was founded in 1867, it immediately accepted female students and, breaking from the norms of the period, permitted them to study life drawing with naked models. By 1900, there were more female than male students.

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I look at the checklist of works I've been sent. There are so many names of so many artists—all related—I had never heard of, despite having studied at two Australian art schools for six years. I assume it's because the creative aspirations of so many of these women were subsumed into their roles as mothers and wives.

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Over the years, various artists made portraits of Doris, her face intense, focused, kind. In one by Arthur Boyd, from 1934, her eyes are closed, her skin dissolving into paint; in another, by her daughter-in-law Hermia from around 1962, she sits in a lush garden, her face hidden by a large aquatic-green hat. It seems the only portrait of her active as an artist is by Emma.

In turn, I can only find one portrait of Emma: Sidney Nolan's *Emma Minnie a' Beckett 'Ai Nostrì Monti'* from 1982, the title a reference to Giuseppe Verdi's song 'Home to Our Mountains', which Emma liked to sing. Although she had died almost fifty years earlier, Nolan's homage to his wife's grandmother evokes the matriarch with great liveliness—not as a wife or mother, but as a small and oddly powerful figure, wielding either a paintbrush or a bunch of flowers, surrounded by immense blue mountains. Somehow, she's not diminished by the landscape—quite the opposite. She blazes with colour and life.