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# Anne-Louise Willoughby, Nora Heysen: A Portrait

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The twenty-two-year-old artist, determined yet hesitant, stares earnestly from the cover of Anne-Louise Willoughby's biography 'Nora Heysen: A Portrait'. By the time she painted this 1933 self-portrait, Nora Heysen (1911-2003) had already sold paintings to three Australian state galleries and appeared to be on the threshold of a successful career. However, despite achieving two major milestones for Australian women artists, she fell into obscurity for much of her adult life. Willoughby describes Nora's story as "a case study in the demise of the woman artist and the social structures and world events that prescribed that demise" (pp. 133 f.). Fortunately, Nora lived long enough to witness the revival of interest in her art, prompted by second-wave feminism's recovery of overlooked women artists and revisionist accounts of Australian modernism. Lou Klepac's two monographs were particularly significant in stimulating an appreciation of Nora and her work, which has been further enhanced through publications by Jane Hylton and Catherine Speck.[1] Willoughby, who teaches on creative writing and biography at the University of Western Australia, has now contributed the first full-length biography of the artist, published to correspond with the National Gallery of Victoria's joint retrospective 'Hans and Nora Heysen: Two Generations of Australian Art'.[2] The author describes her book as an examination of "the events that shaped not only the approach [Nora] took to her art but also the way she consciously lived her life" (p. 14). It is in this second regard that Willoughby contributes most significantly to the existing literature and extends our understanding of her subject.

Nora was one of eight children of the prominent German-born South Australian artist Hans Heysen (1877-1968). Hans achieved popular, critical and commercial success for his landscape paintings which were regarded as quintessentially Australian, notwithstanding their basis in European academic conventions. Thus, Nora enjoyed the benefits of growing up in a cultured household where visitors included eminent figures from the visual and performing arts. However, being the daughter of a famous artist proved a mixed blessing for Nora, who asserted: "Because my father is Hans Heysen, I don't know if I exist in my own

1 Lou Klepac, Nora Heysen, Sydney: Beagle Press, 1989; Lou Klepac, Nora Heysen, Canberra: National Library of Australia, 2000; Jane Hylton, Nora Heysen: Light and Life, Kent Town, SA: Wakefield Press, 2009; Catherine Speck, Nora Heysen: A Tale of a Daughter and Her Father, in: Australian Feminist Studies 19, no. 43 (2004), pp. 55-73, 142; Catherine Speck, Contesting Modernism. Flowers, Portraits, Gum Trees: My Father and Me, in: Hecate 35, no. 1/2 (2009), pp. 108-123; Catherine Speck, ed., Heysen to Heysen: Selected Letters of Hans and Nora Heysen, Canberra: National Library of Australia, 2011.

2 Angela Hesson, ed., Hans and Nora Heysen: Two Generations of Australian Art, Melbourne: National Gallery of Victoria, 2019.

right or not."[3] In an effort to establish an independent artistic identity, it was decided that Nora would concentrate upon portraits and still lifes. She pursued further art studies in London before relocating to Sydney, but her father's long shadow proved difficult to avoid. In 1939 Nora became the first woman to receive the Archibald Prize for portraiture, Australia's most high-profile art award, but the ensuing publicity (and controversy) again defined her in relation to Hans. Willoughby also focuses attention on the pivotal role that Nora's mother, Selma, played in the lives of both Heysen artists through her organisational skills and concern for the family's public image.

In addition to Nora's Archibald victory, her second trailblazing achievement was serving as Australia's first female official war artist, commencing her appointment in October 1943. Nora had actively sought out this opportunity, using her father's influential contacts to help advance her cause. During 1944, she spent six months posted in New Guinea, where Australian and United States troops were battling the Japanese. Although not permitted in the immediate conflict zone, she still witnessed many of the horrors of wartime. Nora observed operations on the wounded, the air evacuation of servicemen with amputated limbs, and once discovered that she was sketching alongside the corpse of a Japanese soldier. She also encountered significant practical challenges, including the disruption of military movements and effect of humidity upon her materials. It is a testament to her dedication that during her two and a half years in this role she succeeded in producing a significant corpus of works recording the activities of women in the armed forces and the Australian Army Medical Services. Willoughby suggests that Nora's time as a war artist may have marginalised her profile within the Australian art world, as it removed her from view just as she was emerging to prominence (p. 220). Paradoxically, it is her wartime achievements that have significantly contributed to the revival of interest in her art during recent years.

While in New Guinea, Nora also commenced her relationship with her future husband. Dr. Robert Black was a promising medical researcher, six years younger than Nora and married with a young son. The two would live together in a de facto relationship before the belated dissolution of Black's first marriage allowed them to wed in 1953. Nora's disregard of social convention was particularly daring in view of her conservative parents' concern for propriety. Willoughby provides new insights into both earlier episodes of parental disapproval and the challenges of Nora's marriage. Black's research into tropical diseases enabled Nora to accompany him on several trips to the Pacific. The resultant works connect her to a diverse range of post-war Australian artists, whose art conveys an increased consciousness of Australia's location in the Asia-Pacific region. Ultimately, however, this relationship was detrimental to her art and the couple separated after Black left Nora for another woman. Willoughby considers how Nora "subjugated her work as artist to that of wife – to the needs of her husband, his profession and interests [and] the running of a home" (p. 304). Indeed, the works produced during their years together are arguably the most uneven of Nora's career.

3 Age, 6 October 1967 (John Hetherington, "I don't know if I exist in my own right").

Willoughby provides perceptive and sensitive assessments of Nora's interpersonal relationships, but is less successful when situating Nora in relation to her broader art historical context. On several occasions she makes broad generalisations or misuses terminology. The claim that "Sydney artists were more conservative, while in Melbourne, there was a willingness to engage with change" (p. 97) is one such oversimplification. Most of the first generation of Australian modernists commenced their careers in Sydney and the later Melbourne avant-garde encountered significant resistance from the conservative local art establishment. Similarly, the art of Bernard Meninsky, one of Nora's teachers at the Central School of Art, London, is described as "unappealing to Nora with its impressionistic and unbroken strong lines" (p. 136). However, Meninsky's art is scarcely impressionistic, nor is Impressionism characterised by the linear, but rather the dematerialisation of form under the effects of light and atmosphere.

Nora's marginalisation is partly due to the emphasis that accounts of Australian art history have placed upon the development of modernism. During the 1930s, contemporary art in both Australia and Europe was a diverse interchange of competing styles, objectives and philosophies. Willoughby alludes to this when she considers the manner in which different Australian artists all "claimed to be searching for the 'truth' in art. Truth is clearly a subjective matter, and each formulated their own version" (p. 102). Indeed, Nora was exposed to a range of modernist approaches during her studies in London between 1934 and 1937. She subsequently invigorated her traditionalist style by adopting a brighter palette, freer brushwork and the use of broken colour. However, much of Nora's art continued to engage with academic as well as modernist concerns, thus destabilising assumed binary oppositions between the two.

Nora's personality could similarly be described as reconciling seemingly contradictory qualities. Drawing upon the artist's letters and interviews with friends and relatives, Willoughby presents a nuanced and multifaceted picture of Nora. She emerges as determined and dedicated to her art in the face of considerable discouragement, yet also reluctant to engage in self-promotion. Likewise, Nora was capable of tremendous bluntness in her assessments of other people or art works, but also "respected people's opinions and ways of living even when markedly at odds with her own" (p. 49). This included friendships with a number of gay men, including the artist Jeffrey Smart. Perhaps they shared a sense of estrangement from conventional gender roles, relationship types and parental expectations. Surprisingly, Nora insisted that she was not a feminist. During her later years, she was uncomfortable with younger scholars who attempted to claim her as a feminist heroine, particularly if she felt they were criticising her father in the process. However, Nora's independent life choices and ground-breaking achievements for women suggest that she was a feminist through her actions, if not by self-definition. Willoughby also shows how Nora's love of nature, particularly flowers, infused both her life and art. Nora stated, "My prayers are drawn from nature not the bible ... picking a bunch of flowers and painting them is a prayer" (p. 322). This provides an insight into the personal imperative that underlay her dedication to floral still lifes, even as the genre became increasingly marginalised within the Australian art world.

Willoughby has approached her biography as a work of creative nonfiction, whereby literary techniques more commonly associated with fiction are employed to enliven the text. Consequently, 'Nora Heysen: A Portrait' is an accessible and engaging read, which will appeal to many general readers, particularly those with an interest in the lives (and struggles) of women artists. Her research is informed by a feminist consciousness, foregrounding the manner in which gender influenced Nora's lived experience rather than feminist theory. Willoughby has introduced significant, new information about Nora Heysen, but her biography indicates that there is still scope for further scholarship on the artist in order to better situate her within broader histories of twentieth-century Australian art.