

G E O R G E *Barabji* B A R A B J I S S I I N



DRAWINGS AND SELECTED SCULPTURE
12 OCTOBER - 9 NOVEMBER 1991

GEORGE BALDESSIN (1939-1978) DRAWINGS AND SELECTED SCULPTURE

The last showing of George Baldessin's work in Sydney was a memorial exhibition at the Art Gallery of New South Wales in 1984 and I well remember his first, at the Rudy Komon Gallery in November 1965, which I reviewed with considerable enthusiasm in *The Nation*.

I still recall the impact he made at our first meeting; he had a special aura, was extremely handsome, sophisticated and debonair and wore a patrician air. I knew nothing at the time of his true background and yet I sensed that the work I reviewed under the title 'A nightmare of distorted men' was created not solely by the person I had encountered. Baldessin was born in Italy in May 1939 and was separated immediately from his parents. His mother, a naturalised Australian, returned here in the hope of swiftly organising immigration for her husband and son which the outbreak of war not only scotched but caused conscription of George's father into the Italian army. The family was not reunited until father and son landed in Melbourne in February 1949.

Growing up as part of a poor Italian migrant family in Melbourne in the 1950s in a xenophobic atmosphere would have brought with it an acute feeling of isolation. George Baldessin, in later years, always referred to Melbourne as his place of birth. Maudie Palmer wrote recently that his "ideas were deeply rooted in his feelings and his imagery can now be seen as a vehicle for his own anguish and sense of isolation". The latter could also conceivably be seen as a cause of the severing of the image, which was to become the cornerstone of much of his work.

This exhibition consists of 34 drawings from 1964 to 1978 amplified by a limited number of sculptural works that relate specifically to the drawings and one silkscreen print with drawing added. The majority of the drawings were executed whilst George Baldessin was in Paris between late 1975 and early 1977. Their subject matter consists of images of Mary Magdalene transformed through Baldessin's vision of prostitutes in the rue St. Denis in Paris. The artist wrote: "We made a trip to Siena and saw some of the Italian primitive paintings with the main painted panels all around. Whenever Mary Magdalene appeared in one of the smaller panels, she invariably had long reddish hair flowing from the top of her head over her body. In some instances she was wearing fur, the hide of an animal and, in at least two distinct and obvious cases, she was growing hair out of her body..... as autumn was coming on I noticed that the girls, the *Madeleines* of rue St. Denis started wearing a kind of rusty red-coloured fur coats. They all had fur coats and all of this particular colour, obviously fox or something similar..... that was my answer - the *Madeleine* of my drawings became the personage which was not the rue St. Denis prostitutes and was not the Mary Magdalene but was both".

There are also in this exhibition a number of drawings of *Emblems* whose subject is fragments of the female form and of various objects such as mirrors, curtains, lights, cones and visual devices, as well as pears and letters of the alphabet. Their format relates to a conceptual art and in them "there is the sense of the alchemist's desire to turn dross into gold but to achieve a Platonic sense of the absolute, the realm of the 'Idea'. But given what the emblems are, it is the perfection of annihilation.... In part the *Emblems* present the fragmentation of the personage and bring to mind another mythic dissolution, that of the god who dared to disguise himself as a woman and who paid the penalty, exacted by women, for his presumption, his dismembered body tossed aloft like so many macabre phallic trophies". In many of his drawings of women it is Baldessin's own face that emerges from the mask adding to the creation in his work of an androgynous presence, the extremes of which transmute one gender into another.

The statuesque sculpture MM, completed shortly before his premature death in a motor accident in August 1978 and cast in 1983, was based on the *MM of rue St. Denis* drawings in which "there is a narrative of allure, seduction, consummation, penitence and mortification". The other works of sculpture in their various ways extend the language of the drawings. The pear, for example, appeared in his work in a variety of guises, as popist intervention, as 'forbidden fruit' and object of desire, as symbol of female form, as contravention of reality or as metaphor for relationship.

I hope that this exhibition, which reveals a small though compelling portion of Baldessin's oeuvre, will both serve to renew an interest amongst the knowledgeable and whet the appetite of the novice. Baldessin "renounced the claim to conventional beauty and wholeness, choosing instead to search for artistic truth through the fragmentation and distortion of the image". At the very core of his work is the conflict between, in Patrick McCaughey's words, the 'cultivated imagination' and 'demonic forces'. This tension brings to the work an edge that it retains, made by a man who only presented to the world what he had become but had to live with the darkness of where he had come from.

Nick Waterlow, Director

1 Maudie Palmer, 'Preface' *George Baldessin, An Exhibition of Drawings*, Heide Park and Art Gallery, Melbourne, 1991, p.3

2 George Baldessin, 'MM Drawings' *George Baldessin: Sculpture and Etchings*, A memorial Exhibition National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, 1983, p.112

3 Harriet Edquist, 'George Baldessin: Notes on the Drawings' *George Baldessin, An Exhibition of Drawings*, Heide Park and Art Gallery, Melbourne, 1991, p.11

4 *Ibid.*, p.12

5 Memory Jockisch Holloway, 'Venus in Sackcloth: eroticism and ritual in the work of George Baldessin' *George Baldessin: Sculpture and Etchings, A Memorial Exhibition* National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, 1983, p.36

DRAWINGS

1. **Drawing**
1964
Ink and gouache
79.0 x 56.0 cms
2. **Personage and window**
1969
Ink and wash
68.0 x 52.0 cms
3. **Drawing**
c.1970
Ink and wash
76.0 x 59.0 cms
4. **Drawing**
c.1975
Ink and wash
81.0 x 60.0 cms
5. **Drawing**
c.1975
Ink and gouache
50.0 x 41.0 cms
6. **Drawing**
c.1975
Ink and wash
76.0 x 56.5 cms
7. **Drawing**
c.1975
Ink and wash
77.0 x 57.0 cms
8. **Drawing (Emblems)**
c.1975
Ink, gouache and wash
38.0 x 56.0 cms
9. **Drawing (Emblems)**
c.1975
Ink and wash
76.0 x 57.0 cms
10. **Drawing (Emblems)**
c.1975
Ink and wash
38.0 x 56.0 cms
11. **Drawing**
c.1975
Ink and wash
66.0 x 50.0 cms
12. **Drawing (MM of rue St. Denis)**
1976
Triptych; charcoal and conte
120.0 x 80.0 cms each panel
13. **MM of rue St. Denis**
1976
Charcoal and conte
120.0 x 81.0 cms
14. **MM of rue St. Denis**
1976
Charcoal and conte
120.0 x 81.0 cms
15. **MM of rue St. Denis**
1976
Charcoal and conte
120.0 x 81.0 cms
16. **Drawing (MM of rue St. Denis)**
1976
Charcoal and conte
120.0 x 81.0 cms
17. **Drawing (MM of rue St. Denis)**
1976
Charcoal and conte
120.0 x 81.0 cms
18. **Drawing (MM of rue St. Denis)**
1976
Charcoal and conte
120.0 x 81.0 cms
19. **Drawing (MM of rue St. Denis)**
1976
Charcoal and conte
114.0 x 81.0 cms
20. **Drawing (MM of rue St. Denis)**
1976
Charcoal
116.0 x 81.0 cms
21. **Drawing (MM of rue St. Denis)**
1976
Charcoal and conte
120.0 x 80.5 cms
22. **Drawing (MM of rue St. Denis)**
1976
Charcoal and conte
79.0 x 120.0 cms
23. **Drawing (Emblems)**
1976
Charcoal and conte
81.0 x 110.0 cms
24. **Drawing (two women)**
c.1976
Charcoal, conte and oil
74.0 x 60.0 cms
25. **Drawing (MM of rue St. Denis)**
c.1976
Charcoal, conte and chalk
76.0 x 56.0 cms
26. **Drawing**
c.1976
Charcoal, conte and ink
65.0 x 50.0 cms
27. **Drawing**
c.1976
Ink, gouache and wash
76.0 x 56.0 cms
28. **Drawing (Emblems)**
c.1976
Ink, gouache and wash
76.0 x 112.0 cms
29. **Drawing (Emblems)**
c.1976
Ink, gouache and wash
76.0 x 57.0 cms
30. **Drawing (Emblems)**
c.1976
Ink and wash
56.0 x 44.5 cms
31. **Emblems**
1977
Charcoal and conte
120.0 x 81.0 cms
32. **Drawing (Emblems)**
1977
Charcoal and conte
120.0 x 80.0 cms
33. **Drawing (Emblems)**
1978
Charcoal and conte
120.0 x 81.0 cms
34. **Drawing**
c. 1978
Ink, graphite and wash
77.0 x 57.0 cms
35. **Drawing**
c.1975
Charcoal and conte on silkscreen
140.0 x 201.0 cms

SCULPTURES

36. **Three-sided personage**
1974
Cast aluminium and synthetic enamel
102.0 x 31.0 x 33.0 cms
37. **Mary Magdalene**
1978-83
Bronze patinated fibreglass and resins cast from completed mould, by Stewart Ross
210.0 cms high
38. **P. H. B. second view of the city**
1965
Bronze
32.5 x 34.0 x 31.0 cms
39. **Tin of pears**
1971
Cast aluminium in pigmented cast resin
18.0 cm x 24.0 cm
Collection: Margaret Plant, Melbourne
40. **(Performer)**
c.1972
Bronze
25.0 x 26.0 x 20.0 cms
41. **Emblematic garden**
c.1972
Six bronze emblems in clear resin base
36.0 x 73.0 x 31.0 cms
42. **Menu stand (for Menzies Hotel)**
c.1975
Bronze
164.0 x 41.0 cms

all measurements are height x width x depth

all works are courtesy of the Estate of George Baldessin except where indicated

MM of rue St. Denis (left)
1976
Charcoal and conte
120.0 x 81.0 cms

MM of rue St. Denis (right)
1976
Charcoal and conte
120.0 x 81.0 cms

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I acknowledge the stimulation received in reading the preface by Maudie Palmer and the essay by curator Harriet Edquist for the catalogue of *George Baldessin, An Exhibition of Drawings*, and recommend to others this pleasure.

And finally I acknowledge as an invaluable source of information the catalogue produced by Robert Lindsay and Memory Holloway for *George Baldessin: Sculpture and Etchings, A Memorial Exhibition* at the National Gallery of Victoria in 1983. I would also recommend it highly to others for further reading.

N. W.



Ivan Dougherty Gallery

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