Art Imitates Life

The statement, “just toys, eh!” is the final comment made by Agnes Abbott in one of the interviews with old people from Santa Teresa about the genesis of the bush toys. That is how she sums up these objects. She is right of course…they are toys, but are they *just* toys. They are intriguing, troublesome and seemingly unclassifiable objects that raise more questions about their origin and their function than it is possible to answer here. These are not the sort of objects that would normally be associated with expressions of Aboriginal culture. They are not about the dreamtime, the Jukurrpa or traditional practices and yet they are still expressions of a living, growing culture. What they are all about is the Aboriginal contribution to the pastoral industry. Even the trucks, the helicopters and the bikes should be seen in this light. It is therefore, important to locate these objects in their social and cultural context. It is impossible to distance them from the particular Arrernte communities from which they originate and also from the history of the pastoral industry in this region. They open up a window onto certain aspects of Aboriginal society that is quite unique and rarely seen.

Toys are common to all societies. They are objects of love and learning that are often cared for and then sometimes discarded. They have a history of development and are part of recorded material culture in the West, where toys are seen a s culturally significant objects. Exhibitions of children’s toys and artifacts of play are now more common and there have been exhibitions of aboriginal bush toys before. Recent research by Claudia Haagen has recorded important information about children’s lives and the objects they played with. She noted that there seemed to be a belief that Aboriginal children had no toys or engaged in structured play[1]. Generally toys in Aboriginal societies were communal, ephemeral and not for keeping. However these objects seem to be an exception. They were made from the same discarded materials as other toys yet they were accorded more respect. In previous research, there appears to be nothing like the finely crafted cowboy figures and vehicles in this exhibition.

So what are these objects? They seem to be a loving depiction of an intimately known world, a concrete articulation of style and belonging to do with the construction of identity and history. They can be seen as poignant recreations of adult life, strongly located in a culture of working life, in an area that was a source of great pride to Aboriginal people, their expertise as drovers, ringers and rodeo riders. The style element is strong as the accoutrements of the figures, the ten gallon hats, the striped shirts, the decorated bridles and saddles all attest to a dress code that is quite specific and a source of respect. These objects could also be seen as artifacts of play that are the results of cultural disruption and interaction.

At first glance many of these objects do not look like they should be toys. They are neither cute nor have exaggerated features. One of their most obvious characteristics is their fidelity to life, their imitative quality. There is a careful

attention to detail and intricate rendering of closely observed minutiae that seemingly belies the fact that they should be played with and destroyed. They look like reproductions of miniature adult lives or some sort of educative tools and no doubt they did inspire role-playing games. However, despite appearances, even when they are isolated from culture and raised to the status of objects on pedestals in galleries, these objects are toys by dictionary definition alone. According the Oxford Dictionary toys can be, *a material object for children to play with, something contrived for amusement rather than practical use*. And also as a term *applied to small models or imitations of ordinary objects used as playthings.* These objects, made specifically for this show, are shiny and new, yet to be played with, and isolated from their context and their place. Yet they *are* toys, full of potential and made with loving care, and should be viewed as such, as well as being indicators of a rich cultural life and history.

To those unfamiliar with the pastoral industry there may be a generic look about the cowboy figures, animals or vehicles, a sameness about them. Nothing could be further from the truth. Particularities abound that only the trained eye of the stockman, the rodeo rider, cammeleer or historian could discern: the large American saddles for the rodeo riders, the realistic camel saddles, the oversized, press-stud rodeo belt buckles, the extra wide bronco stirrups, the long sleeved riding shirts, the bore taps and elaborate construction of the windmills, the exact placement and correct number of gates in the stock yard and the groupings of particular types of cattle. These slight nuances or means of differentiating roles, the ringers from the roughriders, for instance, are easily missed but are important and bring a real richness to the viewing of this exhibition.

There is obvious skill in crafting these objects, and they almost need to be handled in order to be appreciated. The devil is in the detail and it is these details, such as the fine fringing and painted designs on the chaps of some of the rough riders, that somehow distinguish these objects, that give them their didactic quality. They seem vaguely functional and yet whimsical at the same time.

Nearly all we know about Aboriginal art production today leads us to believe that the vast bulk of it is made by the old men or the women at the art centers. There is little work that is produced exclusively by young men. The young Arrernte men from this region have a history of collecting these materials from the tip or car dumps, sitting down in the scrub ands producing little homesteads, stockyards, roadtrains and helicopters in this minute detail, almost like scale models, out of a limited range of materials. In this way this exhibition is unusual and perhaps this is the first time that this young men's art form has been exposed. It is very fine work that requires many skills: modeling, assembling, constructing, and not the least, sewing. The mental picture of all these young fellas sitting down sewing the little vests and pants is an odd but charming one. No females are depicted here despite the fact that women played quite an important role in the pastoral

industry and even the rodeo. The gender issue is reversed. It was the young men who made these objects for the younger kids to play with.

So how can we look at such objects in the context of the gallery? Can we look at them in the context of naïve art or raw art? The figures and vehicles do seem to have that obsessively detailed quality that is a characteristic of much naïve art. And they do have an undeniable charm. The issue of whether the skills needed to fabricate these objects were taught to the artists by outsiders may never be known. There is some conjecture but it seems more likely that this art form sprang up spontaneously in the Santa Teresa region with out the intervention of outside help. It seems that the first figures were fashioned out of mud/clay and the wire figures followed when more of that material turned up in car dumps. The practice of making these figures and vehicles does seem to have been handed from on person to another and at first glance the works do have a certain similar quality. Most of these artists originated from Santa Teresa and to differentiate between two of the artists is often not easy. Perhaps this is some sort of fledgling tradition in the making, another art form that stands alone.

Can they also be seen as found object sculptures? They are made from recycled and salvaged materials that are totally transformed in an imitative way. This transformation of ordinary discarded materials, such as denim shirts, swag material, press stud buttons, drink cartons, tabacco tins and stripped insulation chord, each with their own particular materiality, is recycling at its best. The particular materiality of these objects is redolent with the life of the camp and the bush and the station. They do have a narrative content describing working life and the history of the pastoral industry that is still alive and well on many of the communities. There is a certain authenticity about them as objects. Despite the fact that some look shiny and new there are material traces of the country in which they were made on all of them. They have the red dust and the dirt inextricably embedded in them. They may appear like exotic and quixotic sculptural objects but it is probably best to look at them in the context in which they were made…just as toys for the kids on the community.

These bush toys offer us a window into a unique and unfamiliar world that is rich with story and history. They challenge many uneducated and cliched views about Aboriginal culture: that young men do not make art; that their art can be the result of fine craftsmanship, hard work and careful observation; that aboriginal people do not have treasured toys that need to be cared for; and that Aboriginal people are rightly proud of their achievements in the pastoral and rodeo industries. These toys are tangible examples of a great knowledge and wealth of information that Aboriginal stockmen have about the industry and the land itself. This complex combination of knowledge and experience about and in between two cultures and traditions, is lovingly rendered in these toys and they remain a testament to that pride and this knowledge.

Cath Bowdler, 1999

[1] Haagen, C. Bush Toys, Aboriginal Studies Press, Canberra, 1994 p vii