Almost anything goes: The canvases of Pro Hart

By Derham Groves ; Senior Lecturer, Faculty of Architecture, Building and Planning, University of Melbourne.

Keywords

Pro Hart, Naïve art, Performance art, Australian art

Abstract

Pro Hart (1928-2006) is one of Australia's most famous artists. To a large extent this is because his paintings of the Australian outback were reproduced on a wide range of mass-produced items, such as air conditioners, beer cans, kitchenware, and telephone cards, and also because he appeared in a very popular carpet commercial on television. Hart's critics frequently charged him with crass commercialism because of commissions like these. However, in this article Derham Groves argues that, while it may very well have been lucrative work, it was also a natural extension of the artist's work.

A Naïve artist has little or no formal art training and works outside of the mainstream art world, or in the case of someone who produces art to sell, at least began working outside of it. By this definition Pro Hart was Australia's most famous and successful Naïve artist. Born in 1928, his early years were spent on an isolated sheep station about 100 kilometres east of Broken Hill in New South Wales. Hart loved drawing and painting from about the age of seven, when he discovered that it was a lot more fun to illustrate his correspondence school assignments than to write them.

Pro Hart began taking art seriously when he was in his early twenties and working as a miner in Broken Hill. He attended a few local art classes, but he was mostly self-taught. *'To have studied art would have been a hindrance because they've all got their own methods of teaching and that, and I'd prefer to stay on my own because I was an experimenter and an inventor and I used to invent the techniques of painting,'* he told me in 2003, when I interviewed him in preparation for writing the catalogue for his 2004 retrospective exhibition (which has just concluded touring Australia).

Pro Hart thrived as a professional artist from 1962, when he was 'discovered' by Adelaide art collector Kym Bonython, until his death in 2006. Hart is best remembered for painting the scrubby bush around Broken Hill. However, ironically, he did not consider himself to be a landscape painter. *'Most of those bush things I used to do were to express what the people do in the bush. So I had to paint the bush … [but] I'm not that keen on the bush,'* he explained.

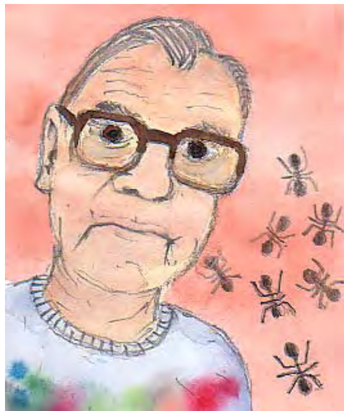

FIG 1: SKETCH OF PRO HART BY DERHAM GROVES

Nevertheless, he allowed himself to be typecast as a landscape painter, which he regretted: *'The galleries are only interested in making a quid [dollar], so they used to come up and pick the paintings out for an exhibition. They'd pick all of the "bushy" ones because they sell. And being a mug [fool] I used to let them do that, which I shouldn't have done. I should have kept them harnessed,'* he lamented. Consequently, much of Hart's other work has been ignored or devalued, especially his paintings on found objects and his performance art pieces.

Pro Hart's death on 21 April 2006 prompted many of his admirers to ask: Why don't his paintings adorn the walls of Australia's major art galleries? Perhaps not wishing to speak ill of the dead, the people in charge of those galleries deferred to answer. But the fact is that

many considered him too commercial to be admitted into the pantheon of great Australian artists. Time will tell.

I have no doubt that Pro Hart liked to make a dollar (he had five children after all!). But was money the sole reason behind him agreeing to have reproductions of his paintings put on, say, Chrysler Airtemp air-conditioners, or to make a TV commercial for Dupont Stainmaster carpet? Many of his critics thought so, and they really let him have it.

Despite Hart's fame and success, he continued to live in Broken Hill, and he remained essentially a Naïve artist. It is not my intention to debate the artistic merits of his work in this article. Rather I wish to show that commercial ventures like those mentioned above, while they may have been very lucrative for him, were nonetheless a natural extension of his work.

PAINTINGS ON FOUND OBJECTS

Many Naïve artists paint on found objects, such as saw blades, milk cans and letterboxes. This was certainly also true of Pro Hart, who painted on an extraordinary range of things, including aeroplanes, a hot-air balloon, boomerangs, computers, cricket bats, a dirigible, footballs, motorcycles, overalls, a piano that belonged to Australian singer Peter Allen, pipe organs, refrigerators and a steam shovel. However, he particularly liked to paint cars.

An art car is a car that has been transformed into a painting or a sculpture, usually by a Naïve artist. For example, a car covered in buttons, a car covered in grass and a pickup truck painted with Christian images and slogans are among the art cars created by American Naïve artists in Harrod Blank's book, *Wild Wheels* (1993). Over the years, Pro Hart has created scores of art cars, usually for charity. *'I think the first one I done for charity was the Volkswagen, then I done a couple of others for charities, and then I done a few car bonnets for charities,'* he told me 2003. *'I support a lot of charities and I didn't mind doing it, but I'm not taking on any more cars – that's too big a job.'* One of the last art cars that he painted was a new Falcon XR6 Turbo Ford Ute in mid-2003, to raise money for the Royal Flying Doctor Service.

Hart's best-known art car is probably the 1973 Silver Shadow Rolls Royce, which he painted with Australian historical scenes in 1999, at the time of the Republican debate in Australia, to show his support for the status quo with Queen Elizabeth II as Head of State. *'I painted the history of Australia on a Rolls Royce,'* he told me. *'It done a lot of good because a lot of people looked at it and they seen the landing of [Captain James] Cook and Captain [Arthur] Phillip and the history of Australia, and all this Australian history all over it made people conscious of Australia and … you know, make them realise that the Republic wasn't a good idea. So it worked good because we had it driven around Canberra so everyone could see it.*

I tell you what; it got a lot of votes against the Republic. It done so much good I decided to keep it. … It had a lot of effect. We took it up to Surfers Paradise … and had it on show at Marina Mirage and it attracted a lot of attention, you know, it made people conscious of Australia. And a lot of the younger generation today they don't know much about Australia, so on the petrol-filler-flap on the "Roller" … I painted [the Australian bushranger] Ned Kelly on there because a lot of kids think Ned Kelly was a blooming rock singer, they wouldn't have the foggiest idea about Australian history. So it just taught people about Australia, and made them conscious about Australia, you know, instead of all the Communist garbage about the Republic.'

FIG 2: HART'S HAND-PAINTED 1973 SILVER SHADOW ROLLS ROYCE

Cars are powerful social symbols, as illustrated by the fact that many people believe you are what you drive. Therefore painting pictures on a Rolls Royce says something special. A few people might even consider it to be an act of vandalism, like the woman who physically attacked the Beatles' hand-painted psychedelic 1965 Phantom V Rolls Royce with her umbrella while yelling: *'You swine, you swine! How dare you do this to a Rolls Royce.'*

Pro Hart was very aware of the powerful symbolism of painting pictures on the ultimate prestige car, and a British icon (even though the Rolls Royce company has been in German hands since 1998) to boot, as an essentially pro-Monarchy statement. *'It was a beautiful white Rolls Royce,'* he explained. *'Mechanically it's a blooming beautiful car, it's [got] a 7.9-litre [engine] or something, it's a really big motor, and I thought, "What a shame to paint on a beautiful 'Roller' like this." And I thought, "But people will take more notice of this than if I painted a T-model Ford or something." So I said, "Right, this is it." So I painted the Rolls up. Then I had to buy another "Roller" because I couldn't paint over it again because there was too much work in it.'*

FIG 3: ONE OF HART'S HAND-PAINTED BIBLES

Another thing that Hart loved to paint was the covers of pocket-sized Gideon Bibles, which he would then give away to spread the Word of God, something that was very important to him. He built a special easel in his studio, which allowed him to paint 44 Bibles at a time. *'I like to average a couple of thousand [Bibles] a year,'* he told me while looking up the exact figures in a dog-eared exercise book in his studio*. 'For the year 2000 – they're all written down here – there's 44 at a time, I suppose there would have been about fifteen hundred. Oh, one thousand and sixty-three. Oh no, that was for 2001. … And the following year I must have got lazy, I didn't add them up. … It gets the Word around the country and done a lot of good.'*

REPRODUCTIONS ON MASS-PRODUCED ITEMS

Pro Hart liked to produce lots of paintings. His son John estimated that Hart produced around 70,000 paintings during his lifetime. Painting one steam shovel or hundreds of cars or even thousands of Bibles was clearly not enough for him. This is one reason why he was so willing to have his paintings reproduced on mass-produced items, such as Arnott's biscuit (cookie) tins, Chrysler Airtemp air-conditioners, Mount Arrow wine labels, Southwark beer cans, Telstra telephone cards, and Willow Ware kitchen products, because this was a logical step up from doing one-off paintings on individual found objects. However, many people criticised Hart for being too commercial, like the *Sydney Sun* columnist Mike Gibson who wrote an article about Hart's Arnott's biscuit tins with the uncomplimentary title *'These biscuits give me a Hart attack'.* Hart always dismissed his critics. *'The people doing the criticising are only critics. They're only two a penny. I don't worry about them,'* he told me. Nevertheless, when I asked Hart about these commissions his first reaction was extremely negative and defensive. But when he realised that I was interested in them because they had become part of Australian popular culture, and that I was not accusing him of being too commercial, he opened up and explained why he did them in the first place.

In 1973 Chrysler Airtemp Australia Ltd. commissioned Pro Hart to paint two Australian outback scenes for its range of eight decorator panels designed to cover and disguise the front of its air conditioners when they were turned off. In an advertising brochure that had an air conditioner resting on an easel in the bush on the cover, he described his two paintings: *'The first I have titled Outback Station. It's really a study of loneliness, the quietness of the outback country. When I see houses sort of stuck in the middle of a vast, flat nothingness, I get a very lonely feeling. The second is called Blue Flats. I don't know if you have ever travelled deep into the backcountry and seen the incredible light the country takes on at dusk. … I've painted the easterly aspect. The dusk light there is all blues and purples.'*

When I asked Hart about the Chrysler Airtemp commission he initially dismissed it out of hand saying: *'A dead loss. Too commercial.'* But on reflection he conceded: *'It was a good idea to see the painting on the wall in front of your air conditioner because they had it designed in such a way that when you closed it up there was a painting there and not a big hole in the wall with air and that coming out of it. … I suppose it worked all right. I have an idea they gave us one. I don't know what we done with it.'* He also explained why he took the commission in the Chrysler Airtemp brochure mentioned above: *'My attitude is that everything should be pleasing to the eye, even when it's a functional thing such as an air conditioner. When Airtemp commissioned me to do two landscapes, I thought it was a great opportunity to bring the outback into people's homes. … I think Australians are becoming more Australiana conscious, and they're happy to have some Australiana around the place.'*

In 1975 Willow Ware Australia Pty. Ltd. commissioned Pro Hart to do several paintings of Australian outback scenes to be reproduced on its metal breadboxes, cake-tins, canisters, kitchen tidies, and TV-trays. When I asked him about this job he angrily exclaimed: *'Oh that gave me the poops properly! I don't know who was pushing it, but I'll never ever get mixed up with any of that commercial garbage again. Oh they wanted blooming dishes with paintings on them and … all that stuff. And its good advertising and people liked the paintings but a lot of people were getting them and thinking they had a masterpiece and some of them were coming up to me to get them signed.'* However, after this initial outburst he once again calmed down and told me the reason why he accepted the Willow Ware commission in the first place: *'The reason I done it was because people like my paintings and I like to see paintings in people's homes and I thought, "Oh, it was just another way to get paintings into their homes and I wasn't really concerned about the money, you know." … I just thought, "Well I don't mind people seeing my work and I like advertising Australia and its always Australiana subjects." And it did pay off. It worked out alright in the long run but a lot of galleries got upset about it because I had a lot of galleries that were investing in my work and when they saw all of that Willow Ware stuff they reckoned it was commercial and they were all "cutting crook" and ringing me up saying what did you do that for. But they soon cooled down.'*

FIG 4: WILLOW WARE DECORATED WITH HART'S PAINTINGS

Pro Hart's desire for as many people as possible to enjoy his art, regardless of the forms it takes, was also born out by Ralph Wilson Snr., the head of the company which employed the artist, who told me: *'Pro Hart was enthusiastic about the project because it brought his art and our outback to people who would not otherwise be able to afford his original artwork. The range was faithfully reproduced by the lithographic process and sold up to our best expectations. It was indeed a pleasure working with Pro Hart – one of my most pleasant memories as a manufacturer.'*

PERFORMANCE ART ON TELEVISION

Performance art places as much, if not more, emphasis on the actions of an individual artist or group of artists at a particular place and time, than on the resultant work of art itself. Performance art was one area where Pro Hart differed from most other Naïve artists, who do not as a rule go in for this form of art.

At the Adelaide Art Festival in 1976, Hart supervised the construction of a huge vase made of blocks of ice with big colourful flowers and bottles of champagne frozen inside of them. The making, the dedication and, later, the melting of the vase was just as important as the vase itself. *'The ice sculpture was probably one of the biggest things we done,'* he recalled. *'We done that in Melbourne Street in Adelaide in 1976. Jimmy Elder down there, the art dealer, organised it and we had about eight tons of ice and built this big tower of ice. [Elder thought it was more like twenty tons of ice.] It was quite a big job. … It was quite a good thing. And then Barry Humphries [the Australian satirist] opened it and Alf Garnet [the bigoted husband played by the British actor, Warren Mitchell, in the TV comedy series, Til Death Us Do Part] came along and I think he did something too. … [Ice] was a good medium to work with. But there was too many people had a finger in the pie. I would have preferred to get a chainsaw and start shaping it off the scaffold, you know, but anyway it worked out all right. We just stacked it in various shapes, the ice, and then as it stacks the ice melts into itself and it becomes solid, so it lasted up there for a fortnight. Yeah, we worked all night on it. Yeah, it was very good. Stacks of ice, eight tons or something, it got a bit heavy towards the end. I don't care what we use as long as it's an art form. I've run motorbikes through paint and blooming chucked it out of cars and done everything.'*

Over the years Pro Hart came up with some crazy ways to paint a picture. For example, in 1978 he hovered in the air in a hot-air balloon and dropped paint bombs on a board lying on the ground below. *'It's a new art form,'* he told journalist Mary Maguire. *'You get right over the board and you can see what you're doing. I wanted to drip paint from an aeroplane, but this is much better. You can see where the paint's going and what composition you're getting. All the complementary colours are pre-mixed very quickly with lead pellets in the jar.'*

FIG 5: 'BALLOON HAPPENING' (1978) BY PRO HART

Hart soon realised that television could possibly spread his Performance art in the same way that mass-produced items had spread his paintings. In November 1979 newspapers around Australia reported that Hart was planning to literally paint Uluru, or Ayers Rock, by dropping bags of watercolour paint on it from an aeroplane. He proposed this *'because I used to see all these people painting lolly-box landscapes, you know, and Ayers Rock is a great work of art itself, you know, and I thought, Ah, this blooming painting pretty coloured Ayers Rocks I'd like to do something about it. So I dive-bombed it with paint in an aeroplane and that caused a bit of a stir.'* But this event never actually happened. Rather it was a stunt for a TV documentary called *Line Up,* which was made by the Australian Broadcasting Commission. Hart recalled: *'We dive-bombed the ground around Broken Hill and dropped the paint … and it was all filmed coming out the window of the plane, you see, and I can remember it coming out of the plane because me son John was running and there was a bag of paint heading towards him as we dive-bombed. It missed him. Oh what a terrible shot! Anyway, we done that and … we got big [aerial] photographs of the Rock and the film crew that done it … had me coming down dive-bombing … and the paint coming out of the window … and I just used this spoon and just dropped the paint on the [photographs of the] Rock and it looked like it hit the Rock, very well done.'*

In 1988 Pro Hart appeared in a TV commercial for Dupont Stainmaster carpet, which showed him 'painting' a dragonfly on a carpet floor using food. This is one of the most popular TV commercials ever made in Australia. *'I didn't mind doing that,'* Hart told me. *'Well, when they explained to me what they wanted to do … to use foodstuffs to do this big painting, like Pro Hart's studio and he starts throwing things on the floor, I thought, "That's a good idea because I might do that anyway." And I thought, "That was a good art expression, that's almost like*

throwing the paint on with a cannon or getting tins of paint and belting them with a sledge hammer on top of a canvas." You know I used to do all of this weird stuff, and so it appealed to me the idea of throwing the foodstuffs, and we done a practice lap out the back of the veranda here … and I belted all this stuff up all over the carpet, and I said, "Oh well, we'll clean it up in the morning." Come out in the morning and it's clean. John's big St. Bernard dog licked the lot up! … [The TV commercial] was accepted as a Performance piece really, it was. A lot of galleries thought, "Oh yeah, this is a lot of commercial rubbish." But they soon settled down and accepted it, and I used to get quite a lot of good media coverage over it too, you know. No, it went over quite well and I had quite a bit of fun out of it because I had a lot of stuff to throw.'

FIG 4: PRO HART 'PAINTING' WITH FOOD ON CARPET

Many Naïve artists are expert at making things. When I was doing research for a book on Australian letterboxes, the impressive level of detail and craftsmanship that went into the making of these little fantasy structures by backyard tinkerers constantly amazed me. Pro Hart was also very skilled at making things. But as he took great pains to point out to me, he did not consider himself to be merely a backyard tinkerer, but as a serious inventor: *'It's not really tinkering. I'm sort of "fair dinkum" [genuine]. … No I don't tinker. I get an idea and I do it. … I started inventing things, building things, when I was a little kid, but I didn't pull things to bits and tinker around like most people, I was "fair dinkum". I got my idea to invent something and then I'm into it, and I'm still doing that today. I'm more of an inventor than a painter. I've invented three different types of machine guns and I've invented quite a few things. Painting is inventing too because, see, I invent different techniques of putting down paint and getting the results. I'm still doing that. Most paintings are inventions anyway.'*

A good example of what Hart was talking about was the method of painting he developed using two 1886 ship's cannons. He would fill up a hollow glass ball with paint, load it into one of the cannons and fire it at a canvas pinned against a wall, repeating this procedure until the painting was finished. *'That is a good art expression,'* he said. *'The effect is the important part. I used to do it with other things besides cannons, you know, I did use big shanghais and balls of paint – all works the same way. But you get a better velocity with a cannon. It is a very interesting way of painting.'* However, he stopped using this method of painting after the police in Broken Hill confiscated his cannons because they were unregistered firearms. *'I got stirred up because … the Police Force … confiscated two big cannons I was using for firing paint out of … and put them in a cell down at the police station,'* he complained. *'Anyway, we*

got in touch with the Commissioner of Police and told him what a mob of "bum holes" they were up here and he released them, you see, and they brought them back. … Oh goodness sake, anyone would think I was a blooming criminal, all I was doing was painting with them.'

In *The Undiscovered Pro Hart,* author Allan Kleiman questioned the validity of the media's interest in Pro Hart's cannon paintings. *'They seem to have a fascination for journalists and television producers and presenters,'* Kleiman wrote. *'Not because of the subject or lack thereof, but because of the way the paint is applied. As if it matters how the paint is applied, or the technique.'* But Kleiman badly missed the point in my view. How the paint was applied mattered very much, because the cannon paintings were to a large extent Performance pieces, although watching one was sometimes rather risky for the audience. When Hart was invited to do a cannon painting on television in Japan in 1989, for example, he decided to fire the cannon using high-pressure air, because it was safer than using gunpowder. But unfortunately *'the Japanese got things mixed up,'* he recalled with a smile. *'I said 300-psi pressure is all I need … and they put 3,000-psi pressure. It worked alright, but it splattered everyone in the audience, but they were good about it.'*

CONCLUSION

In my view Hart's art merits reassessment. Many people dismissed Pro Hart's commissions from the likes of Chrysler Airtemp Australia Ltd and Willow Ware Australia Pty Ltd as examples of crass commercialism, without seeing them in context with the artist's total body of work. In fact they were a natural extension of his paintings on found objects. Furthermore, it is surprising that Hart was not really recognised as a Performance artist during his lifetime, despite his aeroplane paintings, his balloon paintings, and his cannon paintings, as well as his numerous appearances on television, including the TV commercial that he made for Dupont Stainmaster carpet, when he presented his art to the viewing public. Perhaps Hart had the best of both worlds? He was paid handsomely for his art, while at the same time using the resources of his corporate clients' to reach the largest possible audience he could via mass-production and television.

References

Blank, Harrod. *Wild Wheels.* San Francisco: Pomegranate Artbooks, 1993.

Chrysler Airtemp Australia Ltd. Advertising brochure, n.d.

Gibson, Mike. 'These biscuits give me a Hart attack', *Sydney Sun,* 5 November 1976.

Groves, Derham. *Mail Art: The D-I-Y Letterbox From Workshop to Gatepost.* Sydney: Hale and Iremonger, 1998.

Groves, Derham. *Pro Hart: Twenty-One Etchings.* Melbourne: The Lytlewode Press, 2005.

Groves, Derham. *Mask: Pro Hart's Frankenstein Monsters.* Melbourne: The Lytlewode Press, 2006.

Hart, Pro. Interviewed by Derham Groves, 2003.

Kleiman, Allan. *The Undiscovered Pro Hart.* Melbourne: Blue Bush Press, n.d.

Lumbers, Eugene. *The Art of Pro Hart.* Adelaide: Rigby Limited, 1977.