

Arthur Boyd's Nebuchadnezzar Series

The Old Testament story of the fall from grace of Nebuchadnezzar forms the subject of the current group of Arthur Boyd artworks hung in the Mordant Family Library, on the Riversdale property of the Bundanon Trust. Nebuchadnezzar was the greatest of the Kings of Babylon who captured and then later destroyed Jerusalem. Nebuchadnezzar was born about 630 B.C., and died around 562 B.C. at age 68. He was the most powerful monarch of his dynasty, and is best known for the magnificence of his capital, Babylon. During Nebuchadnezzar's time, Babylon was the largest city in the world, with the Euphrates River flowing through it. The name of the city came to symbolize the entire empire. This story gave rise to a series of powerful and disturbing works by Arthur Boyd commenting on the Vietnam War. It was started in 1966, continued in 1967 and extended into the 1990's. This spectacular collection of work, numbering over 70 works, is said to have been inspired by Boyd's witnessing of a self-immolation protest against the Vietnam War at Hampstead Heath, near his home. Boyd equates Nebuchadnezzar with America pushing into the Vietnam war.

Arthur Boyd often drew inspiration from the Bible and ancient mythology. Sometimes he placed these themes in the midst of the Australian landscape. His most recent biographer, Darleen Bungey describes how Arthur was responding to the suffering and madness around him, at the time of the Vietnam war. Much of his Nebuchadnezzar series was contributing to the Vietnam Anti-War protests.

Return to Painting

Arthur Boyd had been working on etchings, lithographs and ceramics in the period before he started the Nebuchadnezzar series. Darleen Bungey describes his approach at this time:

"When he returned, he tore into the paint with a fury, his hands over the canvas like a concert pianist deprived too long of his grand piano. Given the impact, the size and the range of sustained but varying notes, this group of paintings ...was worthy of a symphony. These works would eventually be universally hailed, with one critic declaring the series to be 'one of the triumphs of modern figurative art'"¹

Nebuchadnezzar in a fire, 1969, oil on canvas



*Red Nebuchadnezzar on a fire fallen in a forest with black birds
Detail, c1968-71, oil on canvas*

Signs and Symbols

In some of the Nebuchadnezzar works, Arthur Boyd revisits personal symbols used in previous works. One motif included the hook shaped tree, used in the Bride Series and deliberately introduced again in the Nebuchadnezzar series. The tree bends towards the ground and rejoins the earth symbolising natural cycles. Birds swooping down were a connection to his father Merric and his drawings of black birds.

"Intoxicated with the might of his empire, Nebuchadnezzar began to boast of it as his own achievement, created without the aid of God. According to the Bible, the Lord punished him for his presumption by banishing him to the wilderness where for seven years he led the life of an animal- exposed to the elements, eating grass, insane."²

Techniques and mediums

Amongst the Arthur Boyd artworks hung on the Mordant Family Library walls, are artworks in a variety of mediums. Arthur Boyd enjoyed experimenting by using the same theme or subject matter in a variety of different mediums. Examples of mediums include collagraph prints, oil on canvas and lithographic prints.



Nebuchadnezzar with blue flowers and white dog,
c1969, oil on canvas,

"I think it is a very good idea to be able to turn to a number of different techniques. A new medium offers the artist a variety of keys: it allows him to re-state and sum up without repeating himself."

Arthur Boyd, quoted in a catalogue for the graphic work of Arthur Boyd, Gallery of Modern Art, Dublin, 1972, P7

Allegory

In many works, Arthur makes use of allegorical themes to make comments on universal themes of love, vanity, racism, poverty and war.

What is an Allegory?

- a work in which the characters and events are to be understood as representing other things and symbolically expressing a deeper, often spiritual, moral, or political meaning
- the symbolic expression of a deeper meaning through a story or scene acted out by human, animal, or mythical characters
- allegories considered as a literary or artistic genre
- a symbolic representation of something

What is a Collagraph?

A collagraph is a form of printing in which prints are pulled from a block on which the design has been made up with collage techniques. A great variety of objects can be placed or stuck on the block to create interesting textures. The block is inked with a roller to pick up the top surface- a relief print. It can also be used as an intaglio print by rubbing ink into the surface and wiping away the highlight areas.

Arthur Boyd created many collagraphs, some which were based around the Nebuchadnezzar theme. In a collaboration with the artist Indra Deigan, Arthur used the collagraph technique to respond to a traditional Indonesian myth, producing an artists book called Sangkuriang.



Nebuchadnezzar blind on a starry night, 1992
collagraph on paper

A digital version of this book is available on our website at the following link
<http://www.bundanon.com.au/content/sangkuriang>

Tapestry

This tapestry was developed from a painting of the same name(see detail). Another tapestry made from an Arthur Boyd Painting, hangs in the Great Hall at Parliament House in Canberra.



Nebuchadnezzar making a cloud, 1968-71
oil on canvas



Nebuchadnezzar making a cloud, 1968-9, tapestry



Nebuchadnezzar being struck by lightning, 1968-69, oil on canvas

Discussion and Questions:

1. How has Arthur Boyd chosen to represent Nebuchadnezzar in works from this series ?
2. What techniques have been used to convey emotional states in these works?
3. Discuss the use of rhythm and movement in the composition of the Nebuchadnezzar works.
4. How has Arthur Boyd communicated power and control in his artworks?
5. What meaning is communicated through the use of colour in these works?

Quotes:

"Discussing Nebuchadnezzar, Arthur explained the king's weakness as he saw it: "He wanted to possess everything.....he wanted to possess people, possess animals...he wanted to be them."

"Magenta, yellow and cyan; the primary pigments depicting the primary element, the fire of creation..."

List of Artworks by Arthur Boyd in the Mordant Family Library, Riversdale

Over fireplace	Nebuchadnezzar being struck by lightning, 1968-69, oil on canvas
Lower left of fireplace	Nebuchadnezzar blind on a starry night, 1992-3, collagraph
RHS of fireplace	White Dog with Nebuchadnezzar with flowers, 1969, oil on canvas
Upper left of fireplace	Seated Nebuchadnezzar and crying lion, 1992-3, collagraph
Wall	Nebuchadnezzar with stoat, 1968, oil on board
Wall	Nebuchadnezzar in a fire, 1969, oil on canvas
Wall	Red Nebuchadnezzar fallen in forest with lion, 1969, oil on canvas
Wall	Nebuchadnezzar making a cloud, 1967, tapestry

Further Research:

<http://nga.gov.au/exhibitions/antipodeans/index.htm>
<http://www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/collection/browse>
then type Arthur boyd in search domains

Bibliography and footnotes

- 1 Arthur Boyd: A Life, Darleen Bungey
- 2 Notes from T.S.R. Boase, Nebuchadnezzar, Arthur Boyd, Thames and Hudson 1972
- 3 Education Guide from Limited editions of Arthur Boyd in Print, Bundanon Trust

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