

**Review of 'Through Artists' Eyes: Australian Suburbs and Their Cities 1919-1945', by John Slater.**

Author

Duggan, Laurence

Published

2005

Journal Title

Australian Historical Studies

Version

Accepted Manuscript (AM)

DOI

[10.1080/10314610508682929](https://doi.org/10.1080/10314610508682929)

Rights statement

© 2005 Taylor & Francis (Routledge). This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis in Australian Historical Studies on 27 Jan 2009, available online: <https://doi.org/10.1080/10314610508682929>

Downloaded from

<http://hdl.handle.net/10072/97277>

Griffith Research Online

<https://research-repository.griffith.edu.au>

**Through Artists' Eyes: Australian Suburbs and Their Cities 1919-1945. By John Slater. Melbourne: The Miegunyah Press, 2004. Pp. 238. \$69.95 cloth.**

I must admit to mild alarm on first scanning John Slater's book. The text shares a large number of references including some relatively esoteric titles with my own book, *Ghost Nation*, published in 2001, and yet this book does not appear in the bibliography. As it turns out, I need not have worried. While my study looks at a range of art and architectural practices in terms of imagined space, Slater's volume is a relentlessly empirical reading of artworks as illustrations of social conditions, deciphering the images as supporting evidence for history. Yet, it is still a useful, reasonably priced book. Slater's description of the various works along with the illustrations themselves includes many items I haven't seen previously. The book functions well as a catalogue of urban and, as Slater argues, suburban images. He has some good observations about the place of metropolitan imagery in the art of the period, noting that only five per cent of images shown at the Victorian Artists' Society between 1919 and 1945 were urban. Clearly, the attitudes of those like C.E.W. Bean that cities were places of social (and racial) degradation held sway in main-stream Australian art of the period, while the bush functioned as the national 'imaginary'.

The problem is that many of these artworks were not created as illustration. Certainly, artists like Harold Vike and Noel Counihan intended a portrayal of their times, but this is hardly true of Grace Cossington Smith or Roland Wakelin. This is not to say that these artists' works can never be read as illustration, just that we should be a little more wary of using them for that purpose. Why, for example, do Clarice Beckett's paintings simplify objects into blobs of colour? Some photographic images, like Max Dupain's of surf lifesavers at Manly with its sharply angled overhead viewpoint, are clearly formalist exercises. It seems wrong-headed to look at them for what they can tell us about society. Realism and formalism are, however, only two positions among many others. Certainly, the etchings of Lionel Lindsay show us images of urban decay, but Lindsay's impulse (and his avoidance

of modern machinery) owes more to the romantic picturesque than to a desire to record impartially; his images are as much constructed as they are observed. Other artists' fondness for the fruit stall, as opposed to the department store, may have had as much to do with the nostalgia for impressionism and early modernist formalism (as taught by George Bell in Melbourne), as it does with the record of contemporary life. Sometimes the distinction between 'social comment' and 'studio exercise' is far from clear; at other times it is manifest. The beach, for example, is often a prime site for formalist image-making, yet for Slater, it is largely an excuse for a discourse on wowsersism.

Slater does draw the line at one point, refusing to address surrealist images because it is clear that they don't relate specifically to any environment. Yet, his chapter on art during the Second World War fudges the issue in addressing expressionist work that verges on the surreal. He makes no comment about the presence of the Tower of Babel in John Perceval's drawing 'The Tower in the Town with Lovers', nor does he make much of the observation that Arthur Boyd often transferred figures in his works between urban and rural environments. Boyd's concern with myth at best renders his observation of detail incidental. Slater often has problems with the figurative. Quoting Gary Kinnane on the origin of anti-suburbanism as 'a manifesto of the late nineteenth century international Bohemianism', he adds: 'So far I have been unable to trace any such manifesto'.

Slater has researched the locations of the images well (a useful service in itself), though as he sets out to describe the content of the paintings and photographs, the effect is often like a power-point presentation where we are being told what we can already see. This relentless pursuit of art as archive also has the effect of an over-curated exhibition, where the presence of interesting pictures could be well allowed to set up its own conversation.

While the book is an attractive (and useful) production, I found it a nuisance that the dates of works are only found in the text and not with the images themselves. There are also quite a few footnote and picture references that don't match up, together with a misquote from Kenneth Slessor's poem 'William Street' and a misspelling of James McAuley, evidence perhaps of hasty editing. And while Slater is careful about location and point of view, he is often less than precise when dealing with art media, referring to what is clearly a coloured pencil drawing by Grace Cossington Smith as an oil painting. The disappointment I have with the book as a whole is the feeling that seeing 'through artist's eyes' may mean bypassing their art.

Laurie Duggan  
University of Queensland