

ELEGY TO THE SUBURBAN REPUBLIC

When devising my drawing series of 'Elegies to the Suburban Republic [for Robert Motherwell]', that rare special thing occurred. 'The stars lined up' – and offered me multiple metaphors and symbols, interrelated in various directions and layers. American abstract expressionist, Robert Motherwell – a contemporary of Jackson Pollock, Willem De Kooning, Mark Rothko, Barnett Newman, Clyfford Still, etc - had, across several mid 20th Century decades, created his definitive series: 'Elegy to the Spanish Republic'. He did more than 100 of them on predominantly large canvases, where monumental oval and rectangular slabs of solid black paint line up in frontal 'simplicity' across the expanse of white canvas – and across the United States its hard to enter an Art Museum without encountering a fine example of the series. Motherwell was of a generation who found a lingering, inspirational cause of 'right & wrong', 'good & evil' in the Spanish Civil War. [That is before the 2nd World War soon followed and bombed all such notions out of human comprehension.] Influential novelists such as Ernest Hemingway and George Orwell went to Spain as war correspondents with other International Brigade idealists [possibly initiating the first 'Media War']; and Picasso's 'Guernica', painted in exile, fired artistic awareness of unfolding tragedy. But I'll leave historical analysis to the experts and their myriad studies and books written since.

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The scene shifts to me having a few afternoon beers in my front yard in the 21st Century. The humble hang on the Hills hoist of the big family across the street began to take on the portentous monumentality which had impressed me so much in Robert Motherwell's work – a quality I never noticed in my own single old man's washing line. Across the street on still summer days, sheets and towels hung with the motionless grandeur of Motherwell's tomb and gravestone-like slabs and ovals, before later stormy winds jostled them into 'something else'.

Casually, I began sketching certain undeniable 'hangs' on the backs of envelopes from my days postal delivery. Back up in my studio, cursory experiments in ink, watercolour and collage burst forth with vast possibilities. Always starting from one or another of my grubby envelopes, drawn roughly on my knee downstairs, I took each work [or was it each work taking me] to a conclusion I could not even have imagined before I started. I followed veins of serial development into dense complexity. Then returned periodically to more minimal origins [like Motherwell's] to start a new 'chapter' or 'verse'.

Having only touristic experience of Spain in happy times, and no deep affinity with its political history, I needed to localise/Australianise Motherwell's noble reference. I substituted 'Suburban Republic' and, as I said 'the stars lined up'. With Australia's return to Labor Government in 2022 and consequent revival of a Republican undercurrent, the symbolism began to compound. However as debate goes back and forth about the other forthcoming referendum for 'A Voice', we only have the unsuccessful November, 1999 Referendum testing Republican feeling to learn from and contemplate. Hopefully when we test it again in the future, we won't need to write another Elegy.

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