

## SALA Address 2013- Robert Hannaford

I am honoured to be asked to speak at this year's SALA opening. SALA has become one of those great South Australian events like the Festival of Arts, the fringe, WOMAD, Writer's week and the Showdown that brings artists and the public together in a mutually beneficial way. In the spirit of contributing to this interaction I wish to speak about something we artists call 'seeing', and try to distinguish it from our familiar everyday way of seeing. I first became aware of this different way of seeing as a child when one day I was out painting a landscape. My big brother Ian pointed out to me that the sky was not necessarily blue but could be pink, the tree trunks weren't brown and the leaves were not necessarily green, and what's more the colors changed by the hour. I saw what he meant. At first I was barely conscious of this new way of seeing. Now it seems to be everything, and accounts for my ongoing enthusiasm for painting and sculpture.

It seems that we humans evolved to privilege sight, for it accounts for such a large proportion of our brain mass. Neuroscience is revealing the extraordinary complexity of how the visual image is created in our minds, from light waves triggering chemical signals in the retina to electrical signals through the optic nerve to the visual cortex where somehow the image is constructed. It seems that we have to learn to see. People who have sight restored after early years of blindness never learn to see with confidence. So our seeing is an individual and cultural construction. Generally our eye-brain has evolved over eons to recognize objects (Is that a friend or foe?) to judge distance (grasping branches as we swing through the trees) to distinguish colour (is that fruit ripe?) and movement (what is that animal doing?). When we open our eyes in the morning it is generally to confirm the familiar [is that my wife lying next to me] – all is well. However we are extremely sensitive to strangeness in our visual field. A false note, either in colour, tone, shape or movement activates the neurons and the appropriate response is made. This of course ensures our survival. Our eyes have thus acquired extraordinary capacity to distinguish nuances of colour, tone, shape and movement. Other animals have evolved different capacities depending on their special requirements and their environments. As artists, in our attempt to draw and paint our world we sometimes need to concentrate on, or stretch some of these capabilities. When this happens the 'all is well' frame of mind of ordinary sight tends to dissolve, as colour, shape and tone fill the mind. We then see the familiar as if we are seeing it for the first time. I call this 'seeing'. This can happen whilst observing nature or in the imagination. It is interesting to recall that Rembrandt scholars often cannot tell if his drawing was done from life or imagination.

One day I was out painting and an Aboriginal child who was watching me work approached and quietly asked, "What is the trick?" It struck me as a brilliant question and I immediately answered, "Yes, there is a trick". And I tried to explain seeing as I'm going to explain it to you now.

When you look at something, anything, look first only at the shapes. (The outline of the main masses in an abstract way. Try not to name them). Then look at tone, (which is the relative lightness and darkness of the masses, again resist naming). Then colour, (not just the hue but the relative warmth and coolness). If you do this with intensity thoughts drop away and the sheer beauty of colour, shape and tone is revealed. This is the incentive to re-present it on the canvas or other material with skills that will come to you naturally in the heat of the moment. Of course there are many other skills that can be helpful to test and confirm your seeing, for example, perspective, structure and anatomy. These are analytic skills and they apparently engage a different part of the brain.[the left side] This knowledge is easily acquired, But 'seeing', that is the hard part, that is the trick. It reminds me of yoga. You work hard for ages on a difficult movement and then one day suddenly you've got it. You have the capacity to 'see' almost at will. The mind can then be used to switch from one mode to the other, say from ordinary seeing to seeing tone. All the senses – smell, sound and touch have a similar capacity to 'seeing' in our minds.

Does this have value other than helping us to paint pictures, make music or dance? It does. It helps balance the mind, left brain right brain. Surely this is necessary as we navigate the future. So lets make sure we don't neglect drawing painting music and dance in our schools. Sight, our primal sense, which billions of years ago began as a light registering pigment on some primeval organism has brought us a long way and I'm certain its just the beginning.