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ROAR RE-VIEWED

30 YEARS ON

Denise Morgan

with
an introduction by
Sasha Grishin



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INTRODUCTION
THE MANY LIVES OF ROAR
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Who or what was ROAR or Roar Studios as it was more formally known? Was it an art movement in Melbourne in the early 1980s? Perhaps it is better described as a group of young artists endeavouring to break into the commercial art gallery system by setting up an alternative marketing strategy. Another way of describing it is as a sort of art commune, a collective, and one where like-minded individuals got together to discover who they were, what art was, and how they could make sense of life. Alternatively, one could think of ROAR as a physical space, as a group of studios with an attached exhibition area, one which a number of young artists could use as a 'finishing school' before unleashing themselves onto the art world. Some would describe it as a smallish group of art school students and dropouts who banded together for mutual support while paddling against the tide of fashionable tastes prevailing with the apparatchiks in the Melbourne art world. Others remember ROAR as having a cast of hundreds, with an ever-changing membership, something which was always fluid and in a state of flux. Others, particularly from the outside, remember ROAR as simply an excuse for an orgy of art accompanied by punk music and loutish juvenile behaviour, which was loud and fuelled by alcohol and drugs.

ROAR was all of these, none of these, as well as many other things. It was primarily a cultural phenomenon whose history is like mercury – vivid, toxic and in your face – but impossible to neatly gather together into a convenient definable whole. Of what one can be certain is that ROAR was made up of a number of larger than life individuals who were making some of the best art in Australia at the time and some of whom have continued to develop as significant artistic personalities.

Does ROAR have a history? Yes and no. It is more accurate to say that it has many histories, not all of which can be, nor should be, reconciled. What it does have is a mythology, one which is rich in diversity of detail, some of which is factually inaccurate, but this mythology is held passionately and with conviction. On one hand, this is a faculty of memory. As with so-called facts, memories do not exist as something unproblematic: they by necessity are a construct. We all can think of dinner parties where those who attended have different recollections as to what actually happened. Participants almost invariably make for poor witnesses and in the case of ROAR everyone in the Melbourne art world at the time was, or at least claims to have been, there. On the other hand, this is also a comment on the nature of ROAR. Despite ROAR's constitution, the myriad of meetings, and the 'boards' of artistic directors, it was not a monolithic structure. Unlike the Antipodeans of 1959, with their Manifesto and their single guiding intellect in the person of the highly articulate and well organised Dr Bernard Smith, ROAR was always a fluid organisation with a changing identity and changing personnel. No sooner had someone become entrenched in the ROAR studios and had an exhibition, then they moved on. It may be more useful to approach ROAR from a Zen-like perspective, where to understand the centre it is best to describe the periphery, but never losing sight of the main game.

ROAR was a hotbed of creativity, an inspirational epicentre from where a number of exceptional individuals made the bold and vibrant art that many in the Australian art world were anxiously anticipating. For all of its democratic egalitarianism – initially sharing its limited resources, celebrating a fecundity of invention and the exchange of ideas, techniques and imagery, accompanied by a sexual reciprocity – ROAR was almost from the beginning a divided house. Why? The juvenile rebellion of ROAR was fuelled by the myth of 'otherness' as

these young artists set out to take on the institutional art world. However, even before the barricades had been erected and the standard of the growling striped 'Tassie Tiger' unfurled, key players in the art world – national, state and commercial art gallery directors, as well as the influential curators, art critics and collectors – had come on-side. From the beginning ROAR had far fewer detractors than supporters. Some of the youthful highflyers who came in the name of the roaring animal were prominently embraced and literally overnight became part of the art establishment; other talented artists intimately associated with ROAR were left out in the cold – they were stuck in the purgatory of the art wilderness. ROAR may have collectively marched into battle, but a few individuals singularly snuck off with the spoils of victory.

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The skeletal facts concerning ROAR are the following.¹ In the late 1970s a somewhat disillusioned group of predominantly Melbourne-based very young artists felt that they were marching to a different drummer than the one marking time for some of the oligarchy of the official tastemakers in the local art scene. Change was already in the air, post-painterly abstraction had become stuck in its own colourful rut, while the minimalist and conceptual trends had become hermetically sealed in their own institutional *cul-de-sac*. Peter Booth, once an abstract painter who had participated in 'The Field' exhibition at the National Gallery of Victoria in 1968, was by the 1970s emerging as a highly successful art market darling with his brilliant, boldly figurative, expressionist canvases raising the curtains onto an apocalyptic world of haunting intensity. The Italian Transavantgarde, including such artists as Enzo Cucchi, Mimmo Paladino, Francesco Clemente, Sandro Chia and Nicola De Maria, and German and Austrian neo-expressionists, including Georg Baselitz, A.R. Penck, Jörg Immendorff and Anselm Kiefer, were making their presence felt internationally and were widely reproduced in art journals and had been absorbed into the biennale art circuit. Simultaneously, there was a revival of interest in earlier Melbourne figuration of the 1940s and an often expressed opinion was that the best art from Melbourne was always figurative, emotionally charged and expressionist. What had changed fundamentally in the Australian art world was the realisation that the linear model for the development of art was no longer feasible. In fact art did not develop on a single trajectory leading from Impressionism through Cubism to Conceptual Art, but it was characterised by a complex pluralism, and that there was no centre and periphery, and art of equal relevance could be made in Paris and Papunya and, for that matter, in New York and in Melbourne. In view of all of this, the decision by a group of young artists to go figurative and expressionist in the early 1980s was neither particularly daring nor unexpected. But as a group phenomenon, caused by a band of such highly talented individuals, this was indeed unusual and struck an immediate chord with both the art world and the broader public. Melbourne was ready and waiting for the ROAR phenomenon.

ROAR was born when a converted factory space in Brunswick Street, in the inner Melbourne suburb of Fitzroy, opened with an exhibition of over fifty works by twenty-six artists in June 1982. Lists of names make for tedious reading and almost inevitably lead to sins of omission. It was never a group of the elect, consecrated from above, but a changing cast which sometimes depended on who was available or in town on the day. In its various manifestations ROAR continued until 1998.

The late David Larwill was the most successful and celebrated artist in the ROAR group in terms of institutional, critical and commercial recognition. His memories of the formation of ROAR present one possible narrative. Larwill recalls: 'The [ROAR] group got together because of the Friday night drinking sessions, a lack of appropriate galleries in which to show our work and a general disillusionment with the art schools. I considered it a stroke of luck and good timing that we got together and there are still ten of us working today and making good art which is "good felt" art.'² Wayne Eager, one of the early ROAR artists, is of the opinion that ROAR would not have happened without David Larwill, he was the conduit with the rest of the art world.³ Sarah Faulkner, another founding member of the group, basically agrees that 'Larwill was the leader, the pied piper and the catalyst for the creation of the group and the setting up of the Roar studios'.⁴ Karan Hayman, a fellow student with Larwill at Preston, was the daughter of a woman who had bought an old shoe factory in Brunswick Street, in the then slightly derelict suburb of Fitzroy, as a potential investment property. 1981 she agreed to allow the group of artists to pay a modest rent to do whatever they liked with the space, on a long

term temporary lease. The arrangement was to continue for sixteen years and even after the building was sold the new tenant was happy for the ROAR group of artists to continue to rent the space.

ROAR got its name as a visual and verbal pun. One of the members of the group, Mark Howson, according to one account, 'saw news reports on possible sightings of the rare Tasmanian Tiger. This was scratched, silent, black-and-white footage. The animal paced aggressively up and down the cage, opening its mouth to make only a silent roar. Howson drew a rough sketch of the Tiger which was to become the group emblem ... [for a gallery name] Sarah Faulkner came up with the idea of Roar and its raw pun'.⁵ In short, ROAR came into being as a reference to the noise made by an extinct animal in silent film and was designed to promote raw art. The time was right for such a development in Australian art as it caught the public imagination and the ROAR studios and their exhibitions became highly publicised events. Betty Churcher, Dean of the School of Art and Design at Melbourne's Phillip Institute of Technology, an early champion of the work of Larwill, threw her weight behind ROAR. Patrick McCaughey, the charismatic academic, art critic and Director of the National Gallery of Victoria, and James Mollison, the legendary Director of the Australian National Gallery, became early patrons and supporters. Joseph Brown, one of the most respected establishment figures in the Melbourne art world as a dealer, collector and patron, signed up as an early patron.⁶ Generally the press and regular commercial art dealers, especially Georges and William Mora, Stuart Purves, Charles Nodrum, Realities Gallery, John Hoerner Galleries and John Buckley in Melbourne and Chandler Coventry in Sydney, also quickly came on board. As Stuart Purves recalls, the ROAR group 'came as a tidal wave with Larwill as leader of the pack, testing life to its limit – outrageous in their behaviour and ideas, they lived on barbed wire'.⁷ His Australian Galleries commenced exhibiting the work of Pasquale Giardino, Sarah Faulkner, Mark Schaller and Jill Noble. As one art critic noted on their tenth anniversary: 'ROAR grew out of an impatience with rather than complete opposition to the existing commercial gallery system, a system into which early Roar recruits would eventually be absorbed.'⁸

ROAR did not have a unified style, a single prevailing orthodoxy, but was a loosely built coalition. Politically most were left of centre in their views. Some like Stephen McCarthy were activists, but most were fellow travellers and were conscious of the heritage of the Whitlam legacy where tertiary education was opened up and made free and the arts were held in higher national esteem than sport. In 1982 the oldest member of the group was about thirty, the youngest nineteen years of age. They were all figurative artists and generally had romantic temperaments. There existed a youthful fascination with their own personal responses to the surrounding world. They threw themselves in at the deep end with a passion for art and for living. A parallel may be drawn with the artists of the CoBrA group, who included Karel Appel, Constant, Corneille, Christian Dotremont, Asger Jorn and Joseph Noiret, and who came together in the late 1940s and painted directly and spontaneously giving free reign to their imagination as they explored expressionist strategies drawing on both primitive art and the unschooled art of children. This was at exactly the same time that Jean Dubuffet formed the *Compagnie de l'Art Brut*, collecting and celebrating outsider art. Many of the ROAR artists had an awareness of both CoBrA and Art Brut and travelled to their museums in Europe where both CoBrA and Art Brut were experiencing an international revival in the late 1970s and early 1980s.

The ROAR artists also had an awareness of African and Oceanic arts, which were shown at RMIT in the late 1970s and early 80s, and of Australian Aboriginal art, which was starting to receive serious attention in the Australian art world. Gallery Gabrielle Pizzi, as a specialist gallery in Melbourne dealing with contemporary Australian Aboriginal art, came into being in 1983 and, shortly after opening its own doors, ROAR held an exhibition of Aboriginal art, curated by Gabrielle Pizzi, in its gallery in Fitzroy. There was a certain fascination with the sureness of touch in Aboriginal art and its decorative beauty – as well as the profundity of its meaning. It was art which had an immediacy, ritualistic magic and was socially relevant – and was at the time receiving national and international acclaim and becoming economically viable. It is interesting to note how many of the ROAR artists subsequently engaged with Aboriginal art and Aboriginal cultures, for example Wayne Eager eventually settled permanently in Alice Springs and worked with Aboriginal communities, while David Larwill was both knowledgeable about Aboriginal art and a frequent visitor to Central Australia. Sarah Faulkner, Mark Schaller and Mike Nicholls all travelled to Central Australia and experienced Aboriginal art at first hand.

Although there was a deliberate play on the name ROAR, and the idea of 'raw art', it was certainly not to be confused with an expression of primitive or naïve art. Rather it was art of considerable sophistication and deliberately positioned within a certain history of art making which was popular at the time. What many of these artists valued was the quality of primitive force with its directness of expression and simplicity of form – and a conviction in the way that art was being made. Art was not meant to be a schooled experience accessible only to an élite, but it should convey something of the sheer joy of expression. Although art critics at the time and subsequently associated many of the ROAR artists with the 1940s Australian figurative expressionists, many of whom are erroneously called the 'Angry Penguins', one fundamental distinction is often overlooked. Albert Tucker, Arthur Boyd and Joy Hester, to name three of the most prominent artists from that period, made art imbued with existentialist angst and which was frequently permeated with the eschatological mood of wartime Melbourne. The early eighties ROAR artists may have exploited similar formal expressionist strategies, with richly worked vibrant fields of colour and emotionally laden brushwork, but their art generally celebrated a *joie de vivre*. Their canvases and constructions were loaded with humour and worshipped a quirky inventiveness. Jill Noble, Sarah Faulkner, Ann Howie and the mercurial and brilliant Pasquale Giardino created some of the most colourful and humorous art in 1980s Melbourne. Ideologically, if they did have a direct predecessor in Melbourne art, then it would be Danila Vassilieff, who created a whole genre of populated streetscapes and images which celebrate a hedonistic joy in sex and positive life forces.

When the American street and graffiti artist and social activist Keith Haring visited Australia in 1984 – brought out by John Buckley who was then the director of Australian Centre for Contemporary Art in Melbourne – a bond was immediately established between him and some of the ROAR artists. Keith Haring (1958 – 1990), who was of a similar age to many of the ROAR artists, had formed a relationship with Futura 2000, Kenny Scharf, Madonna and Jean-Michel Basquiat early in his life and subsequently established a friendship with Andy Warhol. While many of the ROAR artists had already travelled abroad, Keith Haring brought with him to Melbourne a tradition of painting which incorporated the ideas of both of his friends, Jean-Michel Basquiat and Francesco Clemente. It was a tradition which ROAR artists could now experience at first hand in Melbourne. Roar group artists Mark Schaller and Mark Howson looked after Haring while he was in Australia and took him out on the night graffiti raids. There was an immediate perceived affinity in the aims of all of these artists. Many of the ROAR artists combined graffiti, street art and public murals in their practice, alongside painting on canvas for display in commercial galleries. James Mollison facilitated, through a Philip Morris commission, the painting of a mural by the ROAR artists in the restaurant of the Australian National Gallery in Canberra, while Chandler Coventry commissioned a mural for the outside of his gallery in Sydney. It was painted by Jill Noble, Mark Howson and Mark Schaller. John Buckley recalls that at the time he 'supported them [the ROAR group] because they were bringing painting back into the equation – painting with raw energy ... painting reared its head in all of that post-modern coolness'.⁹ Although ROAR may have been a local phenomenon, it was consciously in step with some of the mainstream developments in international art.

The 1959 Melbourne 'Antipodeans' were an all male cast, while 'The Field' exhibition of 1968 at the National Gallery of Victoria had forty invited artists, only three of whom were women. ROAR, on the other hand, always had a strong contingent of women artists who included Sarah Faulkner, Jill Noble, Ann Howie, Karan Hayman, Judi Singleton, Maggie McNamara, Gwenda Wiseman, Sarah Boehme and Deidre Giblin. Sarah Faulkner recalls that ROAR was 'a really blokey thing, but the women were feisty ... we were all confident and felt that we had as much right as the men'.¹⁰ In this, ROAR was quite a democratic body with many of its women members coming from relatively affluent backgrounds. They were highly articulate and demanded, and generally received, equality. It was difficult not to notice the ROAR women! Although few of these artists subscribed to direct feminist activism, in the 1980s it was impossible for a young woman artist to completely work outside a feminist consciousness.

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What was the achievement of ROAR? In the short term it stirred up the local art scene with an excitement which was utterly genuine. Both the art public and the popular press were infected with this excitement. Roar art appeared to be fun and trendy and served as an alternative to establishment values where-in young people

could opt out of society and do something that was creative and popularly accepted. Its most immediate achievement was that it revitalised the art world and gave birth to a mythology of a vigorous, youthful, punk-like figuration that was vital and which was expressed with conviction. It gave further impetus to the Bohemian myth of artists living on the fringes of society, carving out for themselves a niche in the art world and establishing a distinctive identity. Although many of the ROAR artists came from comfortable middle class backgrounds and had financial safety nets from home (unlike the earlier generation of the so-called 'Angry Penguins' and 'Antipodeans' most of whom came from dire poverty) they partied hard, lived hard and most worked hard. Ultimately, they may have been neither radical nor revolutionary, but they were reviving a well established tradition of figurative expressionist painting, to which they gave a new spin and to which they brought a fresh vitality.

ROAR also launched a number of brilliant fresh talents in the broader art world. Although David Larwill perhaps was the only ROAR superstar, for many ROAR became a brand name through which to identify and market their art. Now almost thirty years later, few of the participants will not fail to feature their origins in ROAR as a badge of pride and as a promotional tag in any material associated with their exhibitions. Posterity is yet to determine the place ROAR will occupy in the history of Australian art. While one can argue that the Antipodeans – with artists like John Brack, Arthur Boyd and Charles Blackman – created great art whilst they were with the short-lived Antipodeans group, can such a claim be substantiated for the ROAR group? Undoubtedly a handful of these artists, including David Larwill, Jill Noble, Wayne Eager, Mark Schaller, Sarah Faulkner, Stephen McCarthy, Peter Ferguson, Judi Singleton, Andrew Ferguson, Ann Howie, Karan Hayman, Mike Nicholls, Mark Howson, Pasquale Giardino and several others have made a recognised contribution. And, importantly, many – if not most – still carry the stamp of the growling striped Tassie Tiger that brought with it such unforgettable energy and vitality to a group of artists, many of whom were then barely out of their teens.

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NOTES:

1. For a comprehensive and scholarly account of ROAR see the essay by Denise Morgan in this book. For an earlier and valuable account see Traudi Allen, *Roar and quieter moments from a group of Melbourne artists 1980-1993*, Sydney, Craftsman House, 1995.
2. David Larwill, taped interview with the author, Somers, Victoria, 17 January 2007.
3. Wayne Eager's comments were made in the context of a funerary eulogy for David Larwill, Mount Martha Chapel, 27 June 2011.
4. Sarah Faulkner, taped interview with the author, Northcote, 28 June 2011.
5. Traudi Allen, op.cit., p.20.
6. Young Sarah Faulkner was working as an assistant in his gallery at the time.
7. Stuart Purves, taped interview with the author, Collingwood, 28 June 2011.
8. Robert Rooney, 'Roar optimism conquers years', *Australian*, 6 June 1992.
9. John Buckley, interview with the author, Melbourne, 4 May 2011.
10. Sarah Faulkner, taped interview with the author, Northcote, 28 June 2011.