A model of success frets still

By Michael Shmith

TO DECLARE AN interest straight away, I was a pupil of the famous expatriate Australian artist William Delafield Cook. That I was nine at the time and Mr Delafield Cook was employed as an art teacher at my school is merely academic, so to speak.

What is more interesting, as we both discovered this week when pupil and teacher met up for the first time in almost 30 years, was that each remembered the other: I recalled a rather rangy, wiry fellow who once did a sketch of me on a piece of old paper (now lost, unfortunately); he recalled a schoolboy who did memorable drawings. "Children give emphasis to the things that are significant to them — a hand might come out very large — your work was marvellously distorted, in all those expressionistic kind of ways . . . it was quite extraordinary."

My art career stopped where it began: with stick figures. Mr Cook's career, however, has continued apace. Teaching gave way to more active involvement in painting. Now, William Delafield Cook's works hang in many public and private collections. He is respected, feted, and is indeed the very model of the Australian artist who has succeeded.

His latest exhibition, at the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art in Dallas Brooks Drive, South Yarra, is called 'Selected Works 1958-87'. A retrospective? Not really, he said. "We're not calling it that; it sounds like the game's up." The 40 pictures on show range from a small abstract Mr Delafield Cook painted in his teaching days (lent by a collector who supported the artist in his early career, sending him money in England), to a large landscape of Kakadu, which Mr Delafield Cook painted in January this year: "I've done a lot of monumental Australian landscapes recently, which come out of returning to Australia after that whole European experience."

When we met this week, it was two days before the exhibition opened. In the gallery were just two William Delafield Cooks: the artist himself and one picture. Thirty-eight others were due in the next day, with the final picture (the largest, more than three metres across) still in transit across the Nullarbor and not expected to be arrive until yesterday.

Cup Day, therefore, was going to be busy for Mr Delafield Cook and the gallery staff. He had planned meticulously the hanging of the pictures, going so far as to make scale pencil drawings of the wallspace and superimposing where the pictures should go.

Many of the pictures haven't been sighted by Mr Delafield Cook since they left the walls of their original galleries. So how did he feel at seeing his earlier work after so long? "You get a glimpse of a former self; it's like looking at early photographs of yourself," he said. "Do I remember making those little marks?"

The exhibition excludes works from abroad — so what won't be on show are six or seven Delafield Cooks from the collection of one Mr Elton John: "He came in and bought the whole show . . . he's a hard man to get on to if you want to borrow things." But, says the artist, the show is fairly representative: "Most of the phases are there, and I am not a prolific artist. I work hard and fast, but I don't produce that many. I fret and worry."

What worries him? "To try and achieve the kind of quality I always have built in the back of my mind: what one is aspiring to achieve. And that is always measured by what you have understood about great art. It's that thing about museums, I've always been haunted by the quality of Titian and Cézanne . . . you are always fretting about whether you've managed to bring whatever your statement is to its highest pitch. Given it what it needed. And you think you can always push it that little bit further if you go on."

Does he know when to finish a work? "I do now," he said. "I didn't once, with the early things. They were so unspecific in terms of subject." It was this desire to be more specific, more realistic, that led William Delafield Cook in 1967 to abandon his early style ("Loosely painted, ambivalent, ambiguous") for his now familiar stark-realism. This, he said, was a deliberate attempt to return to his beginnings, to learn what he said he never learnt at art school. "We were taught all the other things: the modernist tradition, all those conventional academic notions."

Look at a William Delafield Cook and the realism strikes you at once. It is at once photographic and painterly. "I want to have the authority that photographs have; it's always been a haunting thing." But what do photographs lack that paintings have? "They lack scale, they lack surface and texture and the sense of being an object, they lack that ambiguity between illusion and reality. There's no question that when you paint a thing, it becomes a painting, which is a physical object; the business of paint, which conveys itself as well as what it alludes to and conjures up in terms of images and associations. Photographs are bland and disappointing things in the end."

Yet photography does play an important part in Mr Cook's research: he uses a camera to gain a valuable set of first impressions of a particular landscape. Then, he said, comes the filtering process, "To find what you really want out of it. Then comes the business of actually painting. The automatic decisions that go on in the process of knocking the thing together: where you are exercising your sense of order, the selection you make, also the fallibility of your own technical capacity. The total product becomes something quite removed from the photographic source in the end."

That is the extraordinary thing about William Delafield Cook's pictures: they are realistic, but they are also trying to convey something more in what you see. Look deep into one of his paintings and the depths slowly reveal themselves. "At first glance it simply looks like a documentary type of picture," he said. "But there's more to it. I want to strike that note about the landscape and the *force* of the landscape: those little signs of struggle that have gone on, where there has been some human effort made; a house has been built, a little path has been scratched, or where something has happened. The last picture I have done, I have lit a little fire in the foreground, just to show that someone has been there. Nevertheless, it is dwarfed by the scale of the thing."

Mr Cook does not paint portraits ("I have been asked, but I have never been able to do them. I think it's to do with a failure to be able to confront humans!"); nor does he put figures into his paintings. All human life isn't there? "By saying that, it implies it's somewhere else," said Mr Cook. "There," pointing to an empty chair in the corner of the gallery office, "That chair is pregnant with the potential presence of a person who is maybe just about to arrive or has just been.

"Most of my work is about the absence of humans. That is, the whole sense of human presence is being implied or alluded to, indirectly."

He produced some color pictures of works in the exhibition. An empty park bench, leaves eddying round its base. A solitary haystack. A landscape with (look carefully) trails made by sheep or the smudge of smoke from a campfire. A French commode in the Victoria and Albert Museum, London. "I have always been driven by objects and the presence objects have. I wanted to render a thing which is already a kind of artwork in itself; not to celebrate a banal object, like that park bench, but to celebrate something which is in itself celebrated already. It's in a museum already, spotlit, a source of wonder and delight. To try to add a dimension to that.

"In all my pictures, the only human is the person standing in front of it. It's a complicated psychological thing, how do you respond?"

As proof, Mr Delafield Cook cited an exhibit in the Greenwich Maritime Museum: the cannonball that killed Nelson. "You stare at this little thing with a sense of awe. It might not be the actual thing, but there is this little label beside it that tells you it is. It's to do with our intensity of response to it, because of the way we are prepared for it to mean something. We project meaning on to it, investing it with importance and significance by how we respond to it. So, too, am I selecting certain things to draw and present to you, without comment . . . I'm not making a comment, I'm offering it to you.

"You don't ask me about motives. It's not expressionism, in the sense it's overtly trying to direct some response from you. It's not orchestrated to make you feel. It's simply offering you this thing, so this subtle exchange takes place between the person looking and the subject. Rather than me.

"There's a lot of art that says look at me, look what I've done now, how stunning I am as a performer. I'm not a performer in that way; I rather like the idea I am presenting something so complete, intact, there is no trace of me anywhere. Even the way it is worked is so highly rendered, that there's no trace of how I did it. It has an anonymity about it. I like that. Which might be of supreme arrogance, mightn't it?"

Either that or exceptional shyness. "Maybe a bit of both. There's something about the scale on which these things have been done, which is aiming at impact. It is an assertive kind of way to behave, I suppose."

What next for the artist who, in his words, "lurches from picture to picture"? He is off to Japan, a country that fascinates him. "I am attracted to the strangeness of certain objects I have seen in Japanese museums. I like the idea that I know nothing about what they mean . . . you can't bring anything to them and they can't bring anything to you. There is something interesting going on there.

"In Japan I looked at Japanese landscape painting and thought, how am I going to interpret that through Australian-European traditions that lurk within one's own history?" That is something William Delafield Cook is going to have to work out. One visualises a huge blank canvas and, written in the middle, "WATCH THIS SPACE".

Picture: JOHN LAMB

William Delafield Cook: "I want to have the authority that photographs have."