

1 Melbourne-based art critic Chris McAuliffe developed this insight in an unpublished paper on Brett Whiteley's orientalism.



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2 Henri Matisse, "Notes of a Painter" [1908], reprinted in Herschel Chipp (ed.), *Theories of Modern Art*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1968, p. 135.



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p:1 Brett Whiteley, *Self Portrait in the Studio*, 1976, oil, collage, hair on canvas, 200.5 x 259 cm. Courtesy Art Gallery of New South Wales.

p:2 "I want to leave a nice well-done child here: 20 Australian artists" (installation view), curated by Harald Szeemann as John Kaldor's "Art Project 2", Bonython Galleries, Sydney, April 1971. Photograph courtesy John Kaldor. The photograph shows Harald Szeemann installing the exhibition in Sydney with the unusual collaborative painting by Brett Whiteley, Tony Woods and William Pidgeon, *Linked Portrait*, 1971, mixed media on wood, 373 x 462 cm, shown in the background. The exhibition travelled to the National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, in June 1971.

A gulf separates the world of Brett Whiteley's *Self Portrait in the Studio*, 1976, from contemporary Australian art. Though Whiteley painted until his early and lonely death in a motel room on the coast south of Sydney in 1992, few would regard him as a contemporary artist, nor would they regard the experience offered by the picture as contemporary despite Whiteley's prescient and redeeming awareness, in his vast polyptych, *Alchemy*, 1972-73, of Australia's location in Asia.¹ Whiteley presents a vision of plenitude awash in a pathos that has not recognised itself. His delectable blue studio swims in a space in which all objects are positioned on the same visual register: a million-dollar view of Sydney Harbour from the North Shore is neither further nor closer than the equally sinuous body of a nude woman. His self-consciously democratic equivalence of sensation is a pretext for the instant availability of each object; by conflating body with harbour, Whiteley hoped desperately to achieve an already anachronistic identification with two traditional subjects of conservative art – "woman" and "landscape" – in a rush of psychedelic symbiosis. The objects are available, because they are presented only as objects – not self-sufficient subjects with individual personalities. Such an abstract relationship to his models is fitting, because his painting, for all its defects, aptly describes both a lifestyle (based on sensation and dependent on availability) and a vision. The vision is essentially the same as that of Henri Matisse's famous *Red Studio*, 1911, a work to which many of Whiteley's paintings are heavily indebted. Matisse's famous painting is a vision of plenitude and equivalences deriving from a rigorous examination of *politesse*, pleasure and the weight of colour, then Whiteley's plenitude is always excessive and demanding of a conspicuous consumption (of excessive visual, erotic and extra-pictorial stimulus) in order for belief to be maintained in spite of the strains that threaten to appear. Whiteley's equivalences are hyped up, strident and aggressive. Although his formal decisions, such as the Modigliani-like distortions of drawing or the ubiquitous, saturated Yves Klein blue which serves everywhere as both figure and ground, originate in a principle of equivalences, they are really an extreme, mannered resuscitation of a modernist corpse by all the exaggerated means necessary to hide its fallacies. Matisse would probably have abhorred the lack of measure in an art out of balance.

The viewer implied by Whiteley's *Self Portrait in the Studio* remains determinedly heterosexual, white and male. This, of course, reflects Western art's traditional mode of address, as opposed to its traditional audience which has often been female. These desires have been coded into pictures like Whiteley's for so long that they seem natural: the tabloid, bohemian ambience of Whiteley's carefully decorated pad – its hint of free sex, drugs, the psychedelic distortions of perspective, and bird's-eye viewpoints – appeals to prurient curiosity. While the picture is cleverly knowing – the reference to Matisse is overt, images of art are scattered all through the painting, a sculpture is positioned like a rocket ready for take-off – it is also reverent. This reverence has none of the irony or parody of classic modernism; Whiteley's picture will not bite its owner's hand, since the history of art is taken for granted as a source of validation rather than contestation or disgust. Thus, at the epicentre of all lines of sight is the heroic, tortured face of the artist. Reflected in a small mirror, the painter is the centre of the picture's spatial vortex, and the space of the painting is already disappearing down this vortex, collapsing into a dependent series of already exhausted self-validations (the artist as hero, the artist as romantic seer, the artist as existential outsider) like water down a plughole.