



Lou Klepac *A BUSY LIFE*

Patricia Anderson reveals the constant activity that has marked the life of Lou Klepac, including his passion for and promotion of Australian art and his generous involvement with the National Library

Lou Klepac's life has been something of a time and motion machine, one in which all the different, disparate parts, whirring away in perfect rhythms, have generated an array of exhibitions (both international and local), catalogues, books, lectures and events. As often as not, these activities have served to inspire an appreciative audience for the life and works of under-regarded artists, and they have extended the audience for those artists who are more celebrated.

Klepac's own life, which began on 1 September 1936 in the small Croatian city and port of Bakar, seems to have been busy almost from the cradle. While the larger part

of his life has been played out within the Australian world, a part of his imaginative life—a parallel life—seems to be firmly lodged in northern Italy.

The listener senses this in the telling of his arrival, with his mother, in Venice in 1944, when he was not quite eight years old.

The German army had been moving up and down the Balkans. Klepac's father, who came from a line of ship's captains and who had been a partisan, was vulnerable. So was his mother, who was half-Jewish. Travelling in those times was fraught but Venice, like Paris between the wars, was a place where people from everywhere washed up—it was an island of relative calm in a boiling sea.

A family friend had arranged a ticket for Klepac's father, stating that Bozidar (Bobe) Klepac was employed in the ship-building yards in Venice. When he arrived he found accommodation at a hotel called La Serenissima, and arranged for his wife and only child to travel there to meet him. This journey was not easy. Lou and his mother crossed through territory still smouldering from recent fighting and over the one bridge

above left:
Unknown photographer
Lou Klepac aged six, Bakar, Croatia,
1942
Courtesy Lou Klepac

above right:
Unknown photographer
Lou Klepac and his mother, Vera,
crossing the Academy Bridge, Venice,
1944
Courtesy Lou Klepac



Brenda Klepac
 Lou Klepac, Highbury, London,
 1962
 Courtesy Lou Klepac

left standing. On the evening of their arrival in Venice, Lou's father was at the opera, which demonstrated, if nothing else, a level of insouciance in the face of recently-faced hazards. The next morning, Lou woke to be greeted by his father and that night they were off to the opera to see *Lucia di Lammermoor*—'and then we went to see it again the next night!' Their hotel was a stone's throw from St Mark's Square, which was then covered in

sandbags. Klepac remembers that the bronze horses, which normally adorned the façade of St Mark's Basilica, had been taken down and were lying on their side in the Ducal Palace. Such is the clarity of memory when focused by uncommon events.

Klepac's great affection for the art of Giorgio Morandi was sparked by some surprising coincidences. His mother's cousin had an avant-garde gallery, called the Piccola Galleria, where the family met a number of Italian painters. One was Gastone Breddo, who painted the young Lou's portrait. This artist had been exposed to Morandi's work in Bologna and Lou believes this may have accounted for his manner of painting—that is, working the brush into a still-wet surface of flake-white paint. 'I became a pupil of Morandi by watching,' quipped Lou. Another artist he met at that time, Virgilio Guidi, would, 14 years later, introduce Lou to Morandi himself.

Unsurprisingly, these reminiscences offer a template for the imperatives which have driven Klepac through his variously linked careers: the expression of wonder and surprise, the felicitous coincidences, the celebration of the creative life and something of a distilled sense of drama.

After the war years, the arrival of the Klepac family in Western Australia in 1950 owed itself to another coincidence. There was little point in returning to Yugoslavia;

the German army had stripped all the goods from the family's textile import business which had then been appropriated by the Communists. The family were considering emigrating to Argentina when his father met an old school friend who had spent time in Australia and recommended it. (Coincidentally, the friend was in Australia at the time of the Dobell court case and gave the Klepac family an account of it.) So, from Naples, they undertook the sea voyage to Fremantle.

Lou's first experience of a place that could not have been more removed from Venice and Milan was rapturous. An endless, open, light-filled landscape—a blend of Arthur Boyd and Lloyd Rees—washed by a 'swaying' sea unfolded before him. His days at Perth Modern School and then the University of Western Australia were happy ones, and no doubt his facility with a new language was prompted by his mother and father, who between them spoke Italian, French, English and German. Klepac remembers that there were Nolan paintings leaning against the walls of lecture rooms at the university, with no-one paying particular attention to them; this might suggest why one of his earliest pieces of writing focused on this painter.

His travels after university took him to London where, as a supply teacher, he met Brenda Vierod, who was doing the same. When he asked her out, it wasn't to dinner, nor was it to the pictures, rather, it was for a tour of the Tate Gallery; at the end of their visit, he bought her a postcard of a Sickert painting of St Mark's Square. In 1961, they were married and their daughter Ariana arrived in 1963. Their son, Icarus, was born in 1968, four years after they returned to Australia.

Klepac saw a job advertised at the Art Gallery of Western Australia for a 'Professional Officer' and he applied for it. 'When my name came up, I learnt later, someone said "Klepac, that's a foreign name", and the chairman said, "No, he went to Perth Modern School" and that, I think, swung it. Eventually they changed my title from Professional Officer to Curator of Painting, a position they created.' Later, from 1966 to 1970, Klepac held the same position at the Art Gallery of South Australia, and wrote art criticism for the *Adelaide News*.

A certain restlessness may have overtaken him because around this time he decided

to go back to England. As he has laughingly said, 'I ... wanted to save British art in England!' While he was there, he advised the Art Gallery of Western Australia on some of its acquisitions, made purchases of his own and met a collector whose expansive collection he researched. However, something more substantial was required. The gallery in Perth had been in touch with him. Would he like to come back as senior curator? 'If you ask me to apply, I will not apply, but if you offer me the job, I'll take it,' he said. Klepac not only got the job but, when he started, he was told, 'you can have the staff that you like'. Thus, he hired Barry Pearce to be curator of paintings, Hendrik Kolenberg to be curator of prints and drawings, and Anne Gray as education officer—'very good staff'.

Klepac was committed to producing the best quality catalogues the gallery could create and indeed, as Alan McCulloch remarked in his *Encyclopaedia of Australian Art*, these publications 'made the Art Gallery of Western Australia nationally celebrated'. Lou remembers with pride that the largest exhibition ever assembled of the drawings of Walter Sickert was put together by his staff—for less money (and less fuss)—than a curatorial foray to London or New York today. This fortuitous situation did not last. The usual machinations of the grey bureaucrats, uneasy with a functioning and well-oiled machine, looked for a way to throw sand into the cogs. Thus, Lou found himself initially raised up to the position of deputy director, and then dashed down when the job was ... dematerialised.

What did he do? In 1980, he came to Sydney and became a publisher. The imprint established by Lou and Brenda was called Beagle Press, after Charles Darwin's ship that sailed to Australia in 1836. Klepac's belief that an exhibition catalogue needed to be more than a list, that it should in fact 'be the exhibition passing through time' and his view of reproductions: 'If it looks better than the original that's fine but if its worse then that is a travesty and that's not right', has informed every catalogue he has been involved with. These, naturally enough, are too numerous to list, so it must suffice to highlight a few: *Guy Grey-Smith, Contemporary Drawing* (an international survey), *Contemporary Australian Drawing* (the first major publication on this subject),

Russell Drysdale, William Robinson, Giorgio Morandi and Nora Heysen. As Prue Davidson pointed out in an article about Lou for *Reflections: The National Trust Quarterly* (February – April, 2001), one could easily have 'a comprehensive Australian visual art library simply by obtaining all Lou Klepac's publications'. The subjects of these books and catalogues include Horace Trenerry, Lloyd Rees, Shay Docking, John Coburn, Jeffrey Smart, Judy Cassab, John Passmore, Kevin Connor, Donald Friend, Sali Herman, Elioth Gruner and Albert Tucker.

Klepac's pleasure in being among artists expressed itself in his creation of the Pens and Pencils club in 1991, which encourages artists to meet once a month for discussion, food and frivolity. The Italian Government clearly expressed its pleasure in his ventures when, in 1980, it appointed him a Cavaliere nell'Ordine al Merito della Repubblica Italiana, for services to Italian art. In 1996, the Australian Government recognised Klepac with the award of a medal in the Order of Australia for services to Australian art, and in October this year Klepac is to be awarded an Honorary Degree of Doctor of Letters by the University of Sydney.

Klepac's relationship with the National Library began when he encouraged Donald Friend to donate his diaries and the Library subsequently published his volume *The Genius of Donald Friend: Drawings From the Diaries 1942–1989* (2000). In 2000, Klepac also assembled the Library's Nora Heysen retrospective which was viewed by 40 000 people. His most recent adventure has been to curate the exhibition *Donald Friend: A Charmed Life* which opens at the Library on 9 November 2006. This exhibition is being mounted to accompany the publication of the fourth and final volume of the Library's edition of *The Diaries of Donald Friend*.

PATRICIA ANDERSON is currently working on her fifth book, 'Robert Hughes—the Australian Years'



Greg Power (b. 1974)
Lou Klepac
Donald Friend seminar,
23–24 February 2001

Barbara Konkolowicz
Nora Heysen, Lou Klepac and Judy Cassab at a 'Pens Et Pencils' meeting at S.H. Irwin Gallery Cafe 2001
b&w photograph; 23.2 x 34.2 cm
Courtesy Barbara Konkolowicz

