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PRIME MINISTER

PLEASE CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

**SPEECH BY THE PRIME MINISTER, THE HON P.J. KEATING, MP
OPENING OF ARTHUR BOYD RETROSPECTIVE
ART GALLERY OF NEW SOUTH WALES
TUESDAY 14 DECEMBER 1993**

I am delighted to be here this evening at the opening of a long overdue retrospective exhibition of the work of one of Australia's, not to mention the world's, great living painters.

At the time of Arthur's last retrospective, the critical notice in the Adelaide Advertiser was accompanied by a special offer of a washing machine for forty nine guineas, which gives you an idea of how long it has been between drinks.

Thirty years in fact.

That is remarkable in itself. But what is even more remarkable is that, at the time of the Adelaide retrospective, Arthur had already been painting for thirty years.

He started painting at a time, as one writer has said, when the air was heavy with the arrogance and respectability of old men, old and tired in spirit and in the handling of paint.

When some critics were happy to announce that Australian art pointed to the way in which life should be lived in Australia, with the maximum of flocks and the minimum of factories.

A permanent Antipodean arcadia.

We owe Arthur Boyd a large debt for removing Australian art from this realm of provincial complacency.

With some of the most compelling images of any painter before or since, he showed us those factories and the social deprivation which went with them. He opened our eyes to the horrors of war. To the plight of indigenous Australians and our callous disregard for their future. To the threat to our environment.

Like Nolan and Drysdale, whose work was also featured during the 1964 Adelaide Festival, Arthur Boyd has provided us with new ways of seeing Australia and a new sense of being Australian.

A warts and all way. A way that is more complete, and thereby more valid.

This is not to suggest that Arthur's work is a catechism of grim rectitude. Nothing could be further from the truth.

As befits such a delightful character, his work is full of jollity, of gentle mockery and self deprecation. But at the appropriate time, as I have said, it is serious too.

Someone once said that Arthur Boyd as a painter of the Australian landscape was able to successfully combine the golden vision of Streeton with the darkness conveyed by earlier painters such as Buvelot and thereby to show us the bush as it really was - a thing of menace as well as beauty.

In a more general sense too, he has enabled us to see the darkness as well as the light in Australian life. Just as Manning Clark did. Just as novelists like Rodney Hall and David Malouf are doing.

For the last sixty years, despite the fashions of the moment, he has been there, taking our spiritual temperature, and offering his prognosis for our national well-being in his own unique way.

Not hectoring or harassing. Just opening our eyes to things which we might have been otherwise inclined to overlook or sweep under the national carpet.

As he himself has said, he has been concerned with a certain grandeur in things, even little things. And he has been second to none in helping us to comprehend the dimensions of that grandeur.

People whose judgment is much more expert than mine see in Arthur's work a wide range of influences. At times it seems that of itself it is a mini-history of Western art.

But, as Barry Pearce points out in the exhibition catalogue, while he has taken what he has needed from European tradition, he has also given back something of his own - which is a sense of our essential difference.

He has brought to Australians, and to the world at large, a sense of the Australian identity.

In this way he has lived up to the credo of the Antipodean Manifesto - "in the growth and transformation of its myths a society achieves its own sense of identity. In this process the artist may play a creative and liberating role."

Other artists have played this role too, but it is hard to recall anyone who has played it better.

Arthur's own career has so far spanned sixty years.

But when one takes into account his remarkable forbears and talented relations, it is fair to say that when we celebrate Arthur's achievements we are also paying tribute to the Boyd family. The Boyds have been intimately connected with art and letters in Australia for well over a century.

And in a country which has only known two centuries of European settlement, such a family contribution to our history is surely unique.

It is fair to say that, for ordinary Australians, the idea of being grateful for the existence of particular families is somewhat a novel idea.

From the early days of the colony we have rejected the idea of a bonyip aristocracy, of the idea of special status deriving from the inheritance of money, or property or other privilege.

But the Boyd family is nothing like that.

Their status derives from the spiritual rather than the material dimension - from the fertility of their imagination, and their ability to convert it by pen, paintbrush or potter's wheel to a vision of ourselves which we otherwise mightn't have had.

Arthur, I'm sure, because he is such a modest and unassuming person, would be the last person to claim any special status for his family - indeed, he would probably reject it with the same vehemence that he rejects any ascription of special status for himself.

But he is a special Australian, as the work in this exhibition attests.

And an Australian of rare generosity.

Many people here tonight are probably aware that some of the works in this exhibition are part of the 1975 Boyd gift to the National Gallery. A gift which played no small part in getting the Gallery going.

But not enough for the Boyds.

Early this year I met Arthur and Yvonne in the sadder circumstances of a memorial service to their brother-in-law and great friend, Sir Sidney Nolan.

I was privileged to be able to speak about Sid Nolan's legacy to Australia's cultural life, just as I have been able to do in relation to Arthur today.

And I was able too to announce the Government's acceptance of the gift by Arthur and Yvonne Boyd of their beloved Bundanon properties.

This was a gift to the nation of profound significance, and one which the Commonwealth Government was proud to accept and to support.

Subsequently the Bundanon Trust was established and we provided \$5.43 million to help it bring to reality Arthur Boyd's great vision for Bundanon.

As if that gift wasn't enough, I am pleased to be able to announce tonight that the Bundanon Trust is to be the beneficiary - equally with his children - of the copyright in all of Arthur Boyd's works.

Arthur's assignment of his copyright means that his support for the work of the Trust will continue for many years to come.

The Bundanon gift is valued in money terms at more than \$12 million.

I hope that Arthur and Yvonne Boyd's great generosity will be matched by the rest of Australia when the Bundanon Trust commences its major gifts campaign early next year with my strong support.

All Australians will have the opportunity to assist Bundanon through the Trust's Donations, Friends of Bundanon and Merchandising Programs, and I urge them to do so.

It remains for me to congratulate the Art Gallery of New South Wales for the tremendous achievement of putting this show together. Edmund Capon, Barry Pearce and Patricia McDonald have assembled a collection which can more than hold its own with any of the overseas blockbusters.

And that perhaps gives the truest indication of the achievement of Arthur Boyd.

To a painter who wanted to paint the Great Picture, or if not the great one, then some very good ones, I can only say in sincere admiration, Arthur, that your wish has been granted in abundance, and we are all the better for it.

And now I have great pleasure in declaring the exhibition open.