

Humanities Research Centre Seminar Series

Professor Roger Benjamin

Art History and Visual Culture, University of Sydney, HRC Visiting Fellow

GROWING UP MODERNIST. Writing the history of a Canberra house



Tuesday, 10 October at 4.00pm
Theatrette, Old Canberra House, Lennox Crossing, ANU
ANU COLLEGE OF ARTS AND SOCIAL SCIENCES

This paper lies between life writing and architectural scholarship. It traces the social and architectural history of the prize-winning 'Round House' in Deakin over fifty years. The author is an art historian, which imposes a narrative norm, but the font of memory - his own, those of siblings and friends - cut through with the prisms of immediacy and feeling.

Mini-biographies of the architect (Alex Jelinek, a Czech émigré), his partner (the painter Lina Bryans), and the clients (Bruce & Audrey Benjamin from Melbourne) are inserted into a broader author's narrative of his family growing up in Canberra in the 1960s.

This history is built around visual documents: Jelinek's meticulous plans and elevations, the house being built, views by Sievers that helped win Australian House of the Year (1958). Snapshots from family archives show how the décor changed with its occupants, from the original 'self-finishing' materials, Krimper furniture and modernist art, through psychedelia in 1968, to the polished Italianate of a recent owner. The current project of restoration works across issues of heritage aesthetics, public stake holding, and private ownership. The paper is a first sketch for a book and travelling exhibition.

Roger Benjamin trained in Fine Arts and Philosophy at the University of Melbourne and Bryn Mawr College, USA. He is a specialist in three areas: early Matisse and the art of the Fauves; French Orientalist painting, and contemporary Australian Aboriginal art. In 1995 he co-curated the travelling retrospective *Matisse* for the Queensland Art Gallery. His exhibition *Orientalism: Delacroix to Klee* was held at the Art Gallery of New South Wales in 1997. His most recent book is *Orientalist Aesthetics: Art, Colonialism and French North Africa, 1880-1930* (Berkeley: U of California Press, 2003), for which he received the prestigious Robert Motherwell Book Award in 2004. In 2003 his exhibition *Renoir and Algeria* was organised by the Sterling & Francine Clark Art Institute before travelling to Dallas and Paris.

In April 2003 Roger Benjamin was appointed J. W. Power Professor of Art History & Visual Culture, and Director of the Power Institute at the University of Sydney. He is also Chair of the Department of Art History and Theory.