



A KIND OF REALITY

Artist and cartoonist Michael Leunig and novelist Helen Garner discuss the inspiration of work and the dangers of irony and embarrassment, explore the desolation of back yards, and conclude that seriousness is something to get rid of.

Helen Garner: Where does a piece of work begin? Do you start with a word, or a line? Where does it come from?

Michael Leunig: It often starts with a fragment. A little fragment that glitters a bit, or resonates to you. It's a seed that you pick up.

What is an idea, anyway?

It's to do with a spontaneous movement somewhere within. It's an impulse, an urge to vitality, to life. It finds form, it emerges, no matter how crude it might be in its original stage. And there's desire, too, isn't there? You think, 'I will make something that didn't exist before. I will make a picture, because I want to see a picture.'

Do you feel sometimes that, when you're working, you're plugged into something really deep? Far beyond the personal?

Beethoven said something like that – I didn't write that music. It was out there and I just managed to get it down on paper.

Grabbed it as it went past?

Yes... I think there's a lot in that.

Your duck, for instance. You'd been using that duck for a long time, hadn't you, before someone-

A stranger.

- passed on to you an article by Marie-Louise von Frantz about the symbolism of the duck?

Yes... I found out that it's a symbol of transcendence. It can do what we cannot do. It can go on the water, it can go into the air, it can go on the land – but it has this angelic quality too. It's white – and it has wings.

I don't see how anybody can argue against the existence of a collective unconscious. You work away, thinking you're pulling things out of thin air – or out of ordinary life, more like it – and suddenly you notice, or someone points out to you, that you've plugged in to some thundering great archetype.

And to discover it – to fall into it – and surrender to it, is the most marvellous relief. Because at last you've found a kind of reality. You've found a safe place. You're being carried by very powerful but really benign forces.

You're not messing around in a swamp any more. You've found the current.

You've finally found the mainstream – that current which is so supportive. It carries you and then frees you. That's been my discovery.

How do you know when a piece of work is finished?

That's an interesting question. When it seems to live unto itself, I think. When it's good enough and you don't wish to engage with it any more or interfere with it. Its integrity emerges to a point where it says to you, 'Leave me alone.' When you don't need

to help it any more; when you feel it's speaking for itself, and it's alive to you, and you like it, and you laugh at it. You wouldn't want to change a thing. It's about a mutually respectful relationship. One must respect one's work eventually.

Have you liked working at The Age, working with other people?

I have, but it's held me back in a way. It's kept me stuck somewhere, as a sociable, amiable kind of person who's chatting a bit too much. But there's that great wild sort of thing of the newspaper – the anxiety of a newspaper. It's the smell of the grease paint, and it becomes one's way of working. You can stay stuck there and earn a good living (possibly), but if you're really interested in the broader thing or the deeper thing... That's what I'm faced with now. Still... I do like to keep this connection to the media. It's a form to me, it's a reason to draw. These days it's a bit of a miracle, you know – in the days of film and video and computer-generated images – the tools that are used for drawing. I do love the fact that I work with this – linked to the paper and water... to think that it can come into being in the public arena just a little bit.

What do you think about computer-generated images? Do they entice you?

They're awful. They're cold and they're hard. They glitter but they're not gold. They're soul-destroying, these computer-generated images. They're useful for weather maps, but... See, something is contained in the human hand and the human heart, and it's so undervalued. We suffer from the loss of it. The abandonment of it. And the loss of heart, loss of soul.

Why are Australians so embarrassed about soul and... religion?

About everything, so why not religion?

I noticed when my book Cosmo Cosmolino came out

how embarrassed a lot of people were by it, because it had angels in it. Some critics spent a large amount of energy trying to put that to one side and say, well, there's angels in it but they don't really mean anything.

Did you feel insulted by that pushing the angels aside?

No, because I was expecting worse. I was expecting mockery. I've always thought that embarrassment is a key thing in the Australian consciousness. It's very profound.



I reckon embarrassment is a moment of being confronted with something. It's a deeply uncomfortable feeling. One is being reminded of something which one doesn't want to be near or to be associated with. One is disowning something when one's embarrassed. In a moment of embarrassment there's a truth present.

You look at embarrassment a lot in your work?

I do. One of the ways to deal with embarrassment is to laugh. If there's a clumsiness, it's often a source of embarrassment.

When you're young, embarrassment attends sex. Sex is this powerful thing which threatens to take you over and

everything becomes invested in the desire to cover it up, to conceal it or control it. The embarrassing moments are when that control is imperfect, when other people see that there's some big force.

When people are embarrassed maybe something is naked for a moment. They sense something is disrobed or revealed. There's shame about who we are, the truth of ourselves. Maybe there's great shame in Australia.

Yes, maybe embarrassment is too weak a work – maybe shame.

We're ashamed of ourselves. We're so pitiful, we're so wretched [Laughs] This is our deepest fear about ourselves as a culture – we know the truth: there is not much here. And there's this guilt. There is a fear of authenticity. We seem to celebrate fakes. Charming fakeries in show business seem to succeed very well. People aren't interested in what is real. In fact they're aggressively interested in what is unreal.

Someone I know plays Latin American music, and hangs out a lot with Latin American people. He said to me, 'The thing I notice about Latin Americans is that they've got no irony. They're not protected. They love to dance and sing. They aren't ironic in their social behaviour, as Australians are.'

I'm curious about that. When I first met Helga, and found she had no sense of irony, I was immensely threatened. I've found a lot of my humour doesn't work. This has been very confronting to me. At first I thought it was boring German humourlessness, but now I see it's something very different. It's a very naked receiving of things. We've cultivated the ironic so much, in Australia.

Irony seems to me a very indirect technique. It's a way of protecting yourself from the other. It pushes the thing away, and it's like taking several steps back. It's a kind of deflection.

This is a great fear of presence, of the full-on presence of the other. And the full-on presence of the self. Of being present. I remember seeing Clive James and Peter Ustinov on the telly a few years ago. It was twenty minutes of absolute bullshit – two men so full of charm and wit and irony, they are running at a thousand miles an hour at each other and nothing real transpired in the whole time. There was great applause, but these poor bastards couldn't just talk to each other. Why do we actually reward this? We're scared that if we take away all the charm, there'll be nothing left. If we take away all the tricky language all the tricky technique of painting, then what the hell will we hang on our gallery walls? Maybe that's the fear, too, that if we get to our true selves, if we do the work, there'll be nothing there to save. Maybe this is a kind of atheist view – there is nothing.



That's terrible. You're making my hair stand on end. Listen – can I ask you something: I thought of this as I was trying to find my way to your house and I went down Blessington Street. What do you think blessing is? I'm always trying to puzzle this out. I've been looking for it all my life.

What do you think it is? Some notion of utter acceptance?

When I read the Bible, as a grown-up, at certain moments I would start crying, and it was usually at a point in a story where somebody was blessed. It must

have to do with parents – I realised that it's what I've been wanting and have never had, from my father in particular. I came upon a scene in a book, Tobit, where a daughter is going away to get married, and her father blesses her and says, Let me hear nothing but good of you, all of your days. I bawled terribly at this.

These sorts of things bring tears to my eyes too... especially when there's a sense of blessing that didn't happen. Between me and my mother. My mother gave me a lot, but there was a lot she was unable to do – like so many mothers. So if ever I see blessings pass from a parent to a child – you do occasionally see it – or if I hear someone describe their relationship with their parent, and if I hear the blessing in there, I get horribly teary and very sad. Deeply sad, and happy at the same time. Maybe essentially we know blessing most fully when it comes from the parent. One is restless, too, until one is blessed. There is some terrible incompleteness. The blessing is the final completing. There's such a grace in that. Some notion of utter grace and blessing. It's a complete resolution of something. Clarity and finality and resting. It's possible that some people got it when they were infants, and never more needed blessing – but were capable of giving the blessing.

How did you first figure out that you could be funny of paper? Was that something that struck you at school?

Someone asked me once at Writers' Week in Adelaide, 'Do you think that comedians have a problem that they weren't taken seriously when they were children, and the only way they could be heard was to make jokes?' to charm their way into other people's consideration? I think there's a lot in that. This desire, it's a form of charm. It's one of the ways of being heard.

Did being funny work in your family?

I know people tried so desperately to be funny that they were all competing. Someone would make a perfectly funny joke, but no one would laugh

because that would be conceding. You can imagine a room full of comedians trying to out-do each other. Lenny Bruce said that inside every comedian is a child jumping up and down saying, 'Hey Mum, look at me'. One of the very deepest primal needs is to be taken seriously and to be met. Should one get started in life with some kind of trauma in that process, well, you make other arrangements. You adapt. If I really got going about my family I'd probably start frothing at the mouth.

It's been said that people turn into artists because of some wound that they've got. I don't know if that's a romantic idea. Who isn't wounded, for God's sake?

Yes, of course, we all are. But that doesn't mean the art forever derives from the wound. What fascinates me now is the work of the mature artist, the person who has accepted the wound, and is conscious of it.

Where do you go from there?

I feel that in the past I have worked very largely from a sense of demand – that I have to produce this stuff because the rest of the world isn't producing it. I've got to make these pictures because there should be such pictures in the newspaper, and no one else is going to do them, so I have to do them. This has lain behind a lot of my thinking, trying to nourish these people, whoever they are. This is a neurotic way of working. It's also immensely draining. There's no question it produces some beautiful work at times, and other times bad work. But it isn't necessarily self-expression. This is what the psychologist Winnicott describes as the compliant self, the baby. Somehow I want to comply, want to do the right thing, wanted to be the good fellow, or the funny boy, or the pleasing little good boy, and the good bloke, and provide something nourishing. Opposed to that, there might be a genuine self-expression which comes forth as the authentic, spontaneous gesture, the expressive, joyous gesture, rather than a feeling of having to provide. There might be an authenticity to oneself which one has to reclaim.

Can you see this happening in your work now?

What I'm finding now is this strange thing of sitting down to draw to a readership, and inside somewhere there's a bit of me going on strike and saying, 'No, I'm not going to do it, and you're not going to whip me, you're not going to choke me with cigarette smoke to subdue my voice, you're not going to deride me or pour coffee on me. What is this discomfort at sitting down to work, that one grabs for a cigarette? What is one choking; what is one suffocating? – this unease? Maybe I've sat down to work for the wrong reasons, and it's hurting something inside me that screams out, 'No, I've had enough of this'. This is an extraordinary transformation to be faced with.

And is it painful?

It's difficult and it's painful. I think I want to just work, to sort of adorn the creation. To pay homage to something. To just be. To have a more joyous expression.



I remember you saying that you felt a resentment about being obliged to provide a joke or a punch line.

Mm, very much. Do you have a sense of an audience? That people say, 'What's Helen's next...?'

My work isn't set up like yours. I don't have to produce something every week, every Saturday. What sort of effect does that deadline mentality have on you? It can

be terrifically productive, but at the same time it can make you jangly with anxiety.

There's a very deep accumulating anxiety and resentment at this compliance, this enforced thing to create for a deadline and a readership which seems to be saying, 'Well, you did a good one three weeks ago, and it's about time you did another good one.' It's a shocking way to work – eventually. It's bit exciting when you're young, because one's finding one's boundaries, but this big yearning is the desire for the slow work, the paced steady work where one can get into things more and explore things more. This deadline will never let you get too deep.

Obviously, there's the overriding concern of making a living.

This is very important to me. I grew up thinking 'I will be poor, I will starve'. Somehow I never had any confidence that the world was a provident sort of place, that there was fertile soil.

The older I get, the more I want to be able to turn my hand to anything - in writing - but still to have the ability to control how deep I go in or how shallow. Do you find that you actually withhold sometimes?

As a self-preservation, do you mean?

Or to speed things up, even?

I think I'm starting to understand that it's possible not to expend oneself. It's like, you don't drink to get drunk any more. Is there a mature way of working which is not much discussed in the popular culture that we grew up in? We had these archetypes of the bright flaming stars who burnt themselves out by the time they were forty. Brett Whitely often expressed his romantic infatuation with that notion.

Well, I actually think that's bullshit. Really pernicious. The cultural soil here in Australia is very shallow, though, and recent. The old artist here is almost an anomaly.

Yes, and he's often embittered. There's so much concern for the young artist - prizes and studios available. I don't think that's the problem time. The mid-life time is one of the most dreadful; to cross over that bridge which comes about mid-life is a terrible time. This is where many artists put it down and go away, or fail. It's a very lonely time. Do you know Sam Byrne's paintings? He was a miner at Broken Hill. But look, he started painting when he was 70, and painted into his 90s with great glee. He paints in a shed in his back yard. I think he's one of Australia's greatest painters. And self-taught.

Did you look at paintings a lot when you were a boy, a young man?

Not greatly, no. I remember occasionally going to the old museum which is where the art gallery used to be, and seeing the odd Arthur Streeton, and liking it. But, no, I didn't know about painting. I think it hit me most strongly when I was about 35, when I went to Amsterdam and saw the van Gogh museum. I'd been making heaps of my own pictures up till then, but I didn't understand about making a picture which didn't have a punch line. I was always very literal about my pictures. They connected more to the intellect. They had to come from an idea. But all along they were coming from somewhere else as well, unbeknownst to me.

When I saw the originals of some of your cartoons and drawings, I was knocked out by the physical depth of them, by the beauty of them, when I saw them in the flesh, as it were.

There's the play of making them... the pleasure one falls into when one makes them. After that initial intellectual struggle for an idea, then there's this process of making. That's the saving grace about making a picture. You lose control of it very easily. Mistakes happen, and one goes into it. There's a great playfulness about it, and an enjoyment... there's pigment, there's paper, there is this animal hair on a brush. There's a bit of alchemy going on there. When

you lose control, when you get lost in it, that's when the intellectual notion of it is starting to crumble. One sets out with this map, with this set of plans, and then you get half way through and you realise that's not working; something else is happening here.

Do you need the initial plan? A friend said to me once, 'Plans are to be had and thrown away.'

Yes, you need it. The plan is the door into it. In the losing of the plan comes some humiliation some disappointment... a brokenness, when we are lost from our plan. So we need the plan to get lost with, and then this terrible despair of 'Oh dear, what will happen?' And then we regress into an infantile aching, and at that point we become more attuned to what it is we might be able to make or to say, and this other part of us begins to speak, when the intellectual, the ego is collapsed and looking a bit squalid.



I like the idea of there being two selves. And the intellectual, inhibiting one has to be disarmed, at a certain stage; this bothersome self.

But how does one get rid of this self, this first self, the adapted self, the sophisticated self? One needs it to begin with, but then one must somehow go beneath it. It's a shocking struggle to get rid of that false self. The pictures that the false self makes are terribly dead and boring and dark; they're not

authentic. Some people learn to work so well with that false self. A lot of writing and painting and music is not authentic, but it's immensely successful.

Barry Humphries gets his self out of the way by dressing up as a woman, I mean becoming a woman. He's absolutely a pain when you see him being interviewed. His compliant self, if you like, is so strong and so dry and chilly. It's a bit impertinent to say this... but may be he only feels free when he's being Edna.

And on stage, with an audience.

But gee, he's very brilliant, isn't he? So brilliant – stunning.

Yes if one works in that way, one can almost certainly achieve a great brilliance, and a hard, cutting focus.

Are you a perfectionist?

No. I wish I was a bit more. I'm very perfectionist about my imperfections. I don't like someone tightening it up for me. I become perfectionist after the event of making; not during the making of it, but in the looking after and the protecting of it.

Protecting? Do you mean because of Australia? Because the artist is held in such low regard here. Here: 'You're just a quivering aesthete, a stupid bloody poofter.' Why is it like that here?

I don't know. I grew up thinking that's how it is, and I've got to fit to that. I can't expect any more of them. It's only now I'm starting to get furious about how appalling the situation has been, and is. What is it, this fear? Maybe the artist is a terrible threat. Society doesn't know this in a rational way, but maybe it senses it in some deep instinctive way. An artist is a challenge, a living presence, of confrontation. Even that they make beautiful things is hurtful. In the unconscious there is a beauty and there are devils. People don't want to face their devils, but they also don't want to face their divinity

or their beauty. Nothing too awful and nothing too beautiful, thank you. This carelessness of people, not just artists, but a man who makes a fence out the front, or civil engineers, the way they construct the sides of the roads or footpaths. There's this horrible carelessness all the time, this new appalling lack of any sense of proportion and relationship of shapes.

Near enough's good enough.

There is maybe, an immense kind of inherited or culturally transmitted inferiority. Maybe there is a terrible deathliness in the Australian psyche; some lack of vitality. Part of the psyche is deadened, you know, the zombie, the walking dead.

Always behind us there's this desert. That's very formative to people.

The soul can die and the body can live on.

Sometimes to look into people's homes one sees this. There's a desolate quality in back yards and front yards. You think, how can they bear this? Why did they concrete over that soil?

That desolate quality is something that plagued me throughout my life. There's a certain kind of bush, shrub, which causes that desolate feeling in me. You know that shiny leaf that you fold over and blow into, and it whistles?

Oh the mirror plant? How interesting. I feel that about certain shrubs which were in my back yard. We had a boobialla, the looking glass plant and a few geraniums. I've had trouble with all those trees ever since.

I had to go to Italy before I could see that a geranium was beautiful.

There's also something else that can happen to a back yard or to a back verandah. It becomes an atrocity in a sense; it's almost an atrocious thing. There is such a thing as the humble back yard, which can be beautiful, there's a harshness – the materials,

the way the shed is made. There's no sense of care or softness or love or depth about it, no complexity. Just hard functionalism.

Things that might be desolate are rescued sometimes in your work. I'm thinking of that bloke in the building site playing the ukulele, with the light shining on him and the kid applauding.



That was always an impulse in me, to make the world better than it really was. Basically it was very dreadful and appalling and someone had to make something out of nothing. I had no notion that there's an abundance and you can have some of it, and give to it and be part of it all.

In Australia that's understandable. There isn't an abundance here in a cultural sense. Do you feel you exist in a tradition in your work?

I know in this county I don't. I feel very much part of what has always been happening to humans. I identify with a particular type of human activity – the artist, and the searcher, who's fascinated with the internal life and the external life together. I'm always fascinated by anyone who does that sort of thing. You can go and sit down with a painter who's an Aboriginal, and you'll get to be talking really

quickly. You could have gone back two thousand years and watches someone painting on a pyramid, and soon you would be chatting to them about the paint.

When you were with Aborigines, is that what you talked about?

It depends whether they were women or men. They talked a bit differently. They're much more integrated; painting's not split off from life so much – it's got a nice down-to-earthiness about it. They'll talk about the brush or the little container they kept the paint in with great concern and I like that sort of talk. "Oh, these brushes are better if you cut them bit shorter" and "This is a good red, it's nice and strong, nice red, you can't see through it, it goes on strong." "Nice white, nice and clean." It's playing – showing each other your toys. The artists I was aware of as I grew up seemed very serious. While there is such a thing as an artist, who is different to a person who's a plumber, it wasn't welcoming and warm and didn't have that joyous thing "Here, have a go." "Make a picture, it's good fun." "Write a little poem". There's this seriousness sitting on everything.

But how do you get rid of it?

Daring, I suppose. Saying, "I'm going to take a running jump at this." I think a lot of critics have cultivated this notion of being dismissive to the delightful small expression, as if that is not profound. The only thing they understand as being profound is some kind of heaviness of the heart. I've been reading something E.B. White wrote. "The world likes humour, but it treats it patronisingly. It decorates its serious artists with laurel, and its wags with Brussels Sprouts." A lot of mature artists end up making statements like Picasso's, when he was old; "It's taken me all my life to learn to draw like a child." Or Toulouse Lautrec saying, "At last, I can't draw!" That's when the hand moves by itself.

What does a person do to get past a facility?

One has to do what we know has to be done. What Jung talked about – individuation. One has to leave the crowd, one has to go inwards in order to go outwards, and confront and learn about the wounds, all that terrible painful business, but that delightful business as well. It has to be done, surely, for an artist. I think it's false to believe that one will lose one's art if one finds one's authentic self. On the contrary, one would find one's truest, best expression.

Do you think your work changes anything? In the world?

I don't know about that. But I know that one can keep something alive. It's like you have to go shopping, you have to buy the food, you have to come home and cook it, and you've got to wash the dishes. That doesn't change anything but it sustains something. I think a lot of art is about keeping some spirit alive, keeping the soul of our society alive. The society does what it will, but I sense there must be soulful expression.

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