

CLARICE BECKETT (Australia 1887–1935)

A lone car emerges from the depths of a twilight world: Collins Street, Melbourne, 1931. A few indistinct figures materialise from the mist; they're hinted at with minimal smudges of paint, while syncopated flashes of yellow whites and hot pinks evoke the city's busy lights. Clarice Beckett didn't care about detail: hers is an in-between art, as much an evocation of mood as a description of place. She was drawn to the soft light of dawn, to smoke and rain; she loved the shimmer of heat on a summer's day; the glooming dusk, the sun setting over an empty beach. She evoked all of it, and more, with a profoundly intimate, melancholy accuracy.

Beckett was born on 21 March 1887 in Casterton, Victoria, to a solidly middle-class family. She was extremely shy and from an early age displayed a talent for art. (A painting doesn't demand conversation.) After studying with Frederick McCubbin at the Melbourne Gallery School, she enrolled in Max Meldrum's classes. She was a devotee of his theory that by observing tonal relationships, the artist could accurately reproduce the appearance of the world. In 1924, Beckett described her artistic aims:

To give a sincere and truthful representation of a portion of the beauty of Nature and to show the charm of light and shade, which I try to set forth in correct tones so as to give as nearly as possible an exact illusion of reality.¹

In 1918, Beckett's parents had moved to the Melbourne seaside suburb of Beaumaris. They insisted that she—their only unmarried daughter—keep house for them and discouraged her artistic ambitions. Nonetheless, Beckett continued to take part in exhibitions and to paint her swift, small pictures, although critics were, in the main, dismissive. She hardly sold anything. She had a homemade cart that she used to transport her equipment and mostly painted in the landscape. She was astonishingly prolific.

On 7 July 1935, Beckett died of pneumonia, after painting the sea during a storm. She was 48. Although a posthumous exhibition of her work was well received, before long, very few people knew of her. Almost 40 years later, her reputation was re-established by the curator

Rosalind Hollinrake who, alerted by Beckett's sister, discovered more than 2000 paintings in a hay shed near Benalla. Most were destroyed but Hollinrake recognised the value of what had survived. In 1971, she staged an exhibition of Beckett's paintings at the Rosalind Humphries Galleries in Melbourne. It was a revelation. Clarice Beckett is now acknowledged as one of Australia's most important early modernists and her work is included in major museum collections.

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[caption] Clarice Beckett *Collins Street, evening* 1931, oil on canvas on cardboard, 35.4 x 40.6 cm, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, Purchased 1971

¹ Clarice Beckett, '20 Melbourne Painters', 6th Annual Exhibition Catalogue, 1924, quoted in Frances Lindsay, 'Foreword', in Rosalind Hollinrake, *Clarice Beckett: Politically incorrect*, The Ian Potter Museum of Art, Melbourne, 1999, p 19.