

RICHARD LARTER AT THE NGA



Artist Richard Larter waxes lyrical about the National Gallery's Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec exhibition but isn't so impressed by facets of the art world, as he tells Sonia Legge.

Richard Larter is an artist of strong opinions. "A tiny minority own and control all forms of information," he says. He calls them our owners. "They use the world economic situation to recklessly gamble. They force the population to pay for this by using their money to pay their debts, causing unemployment, starvation and reduced standards. This," he ventures, "is the reason for the poor art market."

When I invited him to visit the National Gallery of Australia in Canberra, Larter was keen to view its travelling exhibition of the work of Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec. I admit I was indifferent, but Larter's almost electric enthusiasm made me love the show. This article takes the form of a monologue by Larter – a comfortable way for him to communicate.

How do I think art's judged? Badly. Most people aren't up to it – they don't know enough. People feel they're entitled to judge art because we live in a democracy. If we were talking about physics and I started telling you my opinion of where Einstein went wrong you'd think, what the fuck are you talking

about? You haven't the right to – you're not a physicist. People are mildly interested in science but it doesn't make them experts. If it's true of physics then it must be true of art.

Others are ashamed to give their opinion because they realise that what they're saying is untutored and unworthy. But quite a large proportion of people think they have every right to give their opinion, unfortunately. I blame the ABC [Australian Broadcasting Corporation] for this because it automatically gives equal time to political parties. I suppose there might be some sensible reason but I can't see it. I think we need to censor out people talking rubbish. If you know someone's going to say something silly, giving them equal time isn't democratic, it's stupid.

Most people have got very weak ideas. Many of the people teaching art aren't up to it. I can remember there was a woman teaching back when I was teaching and she used to tell the children absolute nonsense.

The Archibald? Being judged for a life in art, that's sensible, but to send one painting and stick it on the wall of the Art Gallery of New South Wales... I mean, that's so silly. I can't see the point. And, of course, people

who know nothing about art really are very happy talking to idiots about the winners of the Archibald.

We looked briefly at the permanent collection until the Toulouse-Lautrec show opened. The transformation of Larter's mood once in front of art he loves was something to experience.

That's a Bonnard. We own it... look at it! We're *so lucky* to have that painting. This is the lady who he had as a model and, finally, years later, he married her... it's such a happy existence. She was the one he painted in the bath. It's a lovely painting, look at the light. See? Beautiful.

On to the Toulouse-Lautrec exhibition, which was organised chronologically. These first paintings were painted when he was a student, very ordinary. You can't tell that he did them – he's not got the Toulouse-Lautrec thing yet. Art was taught properly in those days – how to handle your oil, how to get a likeness, all that sort of thing.

Now we begin to see the real man. You can see he's beginning to paint what he wants, how he wants. It's different because he was dotting Is and crossing Ts over there as a



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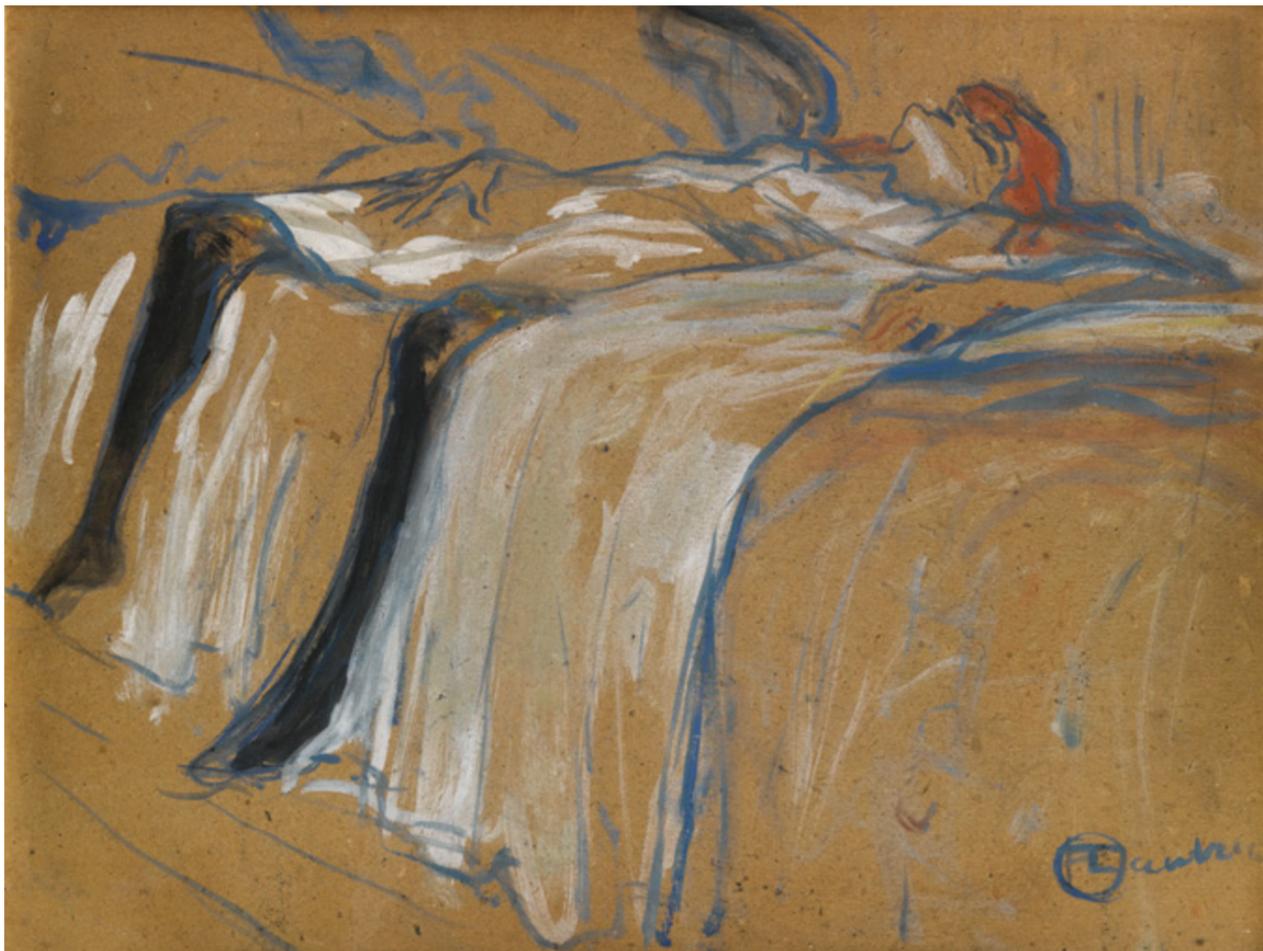




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“ IT'S AN ADVERTISEMENT AND WE'RE SEEING IT IN AN ART GALLERY! HOW MANY TOTALLY COMMERCIAL THINGS DO YOU SEE IN A GALLERY?”

student... and, here, look at the hand, it's hardly a hand. You can see he's beginning to do his way of drawing and seeing.

You can see he's interested in hair. He liked redheads. At this stage he's still being influenced by Impressionism, which was the past. We list him with the Post-Impressionists.

When he's beginning to insert himself in the work he only puts in what interests him. That becomes typical of him. Look at that background. He's put it in because some idiot wants it to be there, but Lautrec doesn't actually give a monkey's. Poor old soul, it's very difficult for him. Anyway, you're allowed to gloss over things in Impressionism, take shortcuts with backgrounds. Then he can concentrate on what's important – the chick's face and the chick's hair.

We stood in front of Alone [Seule], 1896. He elides anything that's unimportant to him. This one's finished, what more do you need? A person with no brain would go on – dab, dab, dab – but he's got a brain. He's highlighted the hair, he's got it right. Why go further? Nothing in it for him.

Then Richard gave his critique of The two friends [Le deux amies], 1894. See how he's letting the card show through? It's done so quickly, just getting something recorded. The paint is mixed with petrol. Look what it does! He's turned oil painting into watercolour, and this is his own invention. Think how dangerous! They were all smoking and lighting pipes. It's just a streaky sheen, a covering, and you can see the underlying board. It's a beautiful work. Very spare. Almost like a drawing.

In those early paintings he's got all that filthy thick oil paint but this is a true Toulouse-

Lautrec. A beautiful example, wet handling, very fast. Look at the lovely ginger hair, the lips; anything that's important he goes over twice. And this is so different from everyone else at this period. He's a genius. Like Van Gogh, except he's selling and Van Gogh isn't.

Lesbianism was considered so obscene but he was tremendously sympathetic towards these ladies. He showed the tenderness between them. Common ordinary morality says that how they earn their money is disgusting but he wasn't like that, he just thought it was nice that they got on so well. I like him.

We moved on to the prints. It's amazing when you think it's just a greasy lithographic crayon drawn on a stone, and for the splashes a scraper, which he uses like a rubber. He could really draw. Spattering! He invented it. I've spattered – I stole it from Henri. He's somebody worth stealing from. All those fourth-rate commercial artists weren't up to doing that spatter. That's the difference between being a genius and an ordinary person. It's an advertisement and we're seeing it in an art gallery! How many totally commercial things do you see in a gallery? Most commercial people are idiots.

Here, we found La Goulue entering the Moulin Rouge [La Goulue entrant au Moulin Rouge], 1892. That lady is La Goulue – it means 'greedy guts'. But he liked her, and even when she became old and horrible he did work for her. She had her own show, her own notices and he did them for her because he was a very nice person. Other people thought he was a bad person mixing with prostitutes but he just saw them as happy people, though La Goulue didn't have a happy life. She knew he'd do that to her face but she didn't care. She just liked him. Good boy, he doesn't flatter or tell lies, you can trust him.

And, finally, Queen of pleasure [Reine de joie], 1892. This is a lovely one. See that fat bald man? In so many of these pictures you can see the Herbert in the background, the anonymous Herbert. Here he's combed his hair so some of the baldness is covered up. The lady who's kissing him is a lady of easy virtue but that's exactly it. He's fat, bald, old and ugly and the only way he can get near a woman is to pay.

From his paintings you get his slant on life, which most people wouldn't have accepted. The Moulin Rouge was one of the most dangerous places to go because the customers were rough and ready people. You didn't go there to see dancing, you went there to see sights. The whole point of the can-can was that the dancers didn't wear knickers, so you had a good view if you were that way inclined.

People today probably think Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec was a rude little dwarf. I haven't got a very high view of the Australian public to be perfectly honest with you. Most people can't be bothered to stand and look.

Drained but quite euphoric I dropped Richard home. Slightly unnerved, I wondered if I'm capable of generating for myself such infectious enthusiasm. ■

01 Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, Queen of Pleasure [Reine de joie], 1892, planographic, brush, spatter and transfer screen lithograph on cream, wove paper, 138.4 x 93cm
 02 Richard Larter, Unfettered Single Pass, 1969, synthetic polymer paint on composition board, 122 x 183.5cm
 03 Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, La Goulue entering the Moulin Rouge [La Goulue entrant au Moulin Rouge], 1892, oil on cardboard, 79.4 x 59cm
 04 Richard Larter, Vernal #2, 1989, acrylic on canvas, 179 x 157cm
 05 Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, Alone [Seule], 1896, oil on cardboard, 30 x 40cm
 06 Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, The two friends [Les deux amies], 1894, oil on cardboard, 47.9 x 34cm
 Courtesy the artist and the National Gallery of Australia