

1997 Samstag essay

Elephant Poo

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In 1959, just two years before Gordon Samstag arrived in Australia, the *Antipodean Manifesto* declared Dada "as dead as the dodo" and repudiated abstract art as "insufficient for our time...a death of the mind and spirit."

The *Manifesto's* principal intent was to assert the primacy of figurative painting, while lauding the importance of Australian subject matter and myth-making in our art. But it also represented a social argument against uncritical acceptance of received ideas and values, in this case the artistic ideas then emanating from New York and beginning to overwhelm a whole generation of Australian artists.

We do not know if Gordon Samstag read, or even knew of the *Manifesto*. What would he have made of it, fresh as he was from the international centre of avant garde art, yet artistically formed by the values of American social realism and experience of the Great Depression?

Whatever its historical weight or wisdom, the *Manifesto* was certainly a brave call by Bernard Smith and his seven artist co-signatories, for an Australian independence from its traditionally provincial relationship to international movements in art.

Fifteen years on, this debate was extended by Terry Smith in a well-known essay, *The Provincialism Problem*. Defining provincialism as "an attitude of subservience to an externally imposed hierarchy of cultural values", he usefully proposed that provincialism is not merely a function of geographic location and that "most artists the world over live in art communities that are formed by a relentless provincialism". Including, moreover, "most New York artists, critics, collectors, dealers and gallery-goers".

If one accepts this thesis in principle, the more imponderable question then arises of what it is that constitutes cultural independence.

It is unlikely in our era that it means an hermetic culture, unengaged with or unopen to the broad stream. Which community possessing sophisticated cultural ambitions but low critical mass - Adelaide for example - realistically would insulate itself or its artists from the reciprocal and stimulating benefits available in exchanges with larger, more dynamic centres? What innovations would artists bring about, without reference to the sustaining traffic in discourses of their fellow travellers, or direct cognizance of civilisation's achievements elsewhere?

Are these questions which any longer preoccupy Australian artists?

For while the embrace of international currencies might occasionally breed dysfunctional hybrids, its evasion is no longer a tenable option for most artists, who more likely will be predisposed to unimpeded contact and mobility as the most strengthening developmental path.

We now recognise with effortless perspicacity that our late twentieth century social environment is subject to implacable world forces; equally, that the dominant "hierarchy of cultural values" which has influenced developments in Australian art is in disarray, blown away by the diversity which, irretrievably, has become common international stock. By shifting the criteria of meaning away from hierarchies of materials, style and codes exclusively, this unprecedented common stock offers liberating choice and expressive latitude to artists. It is choice that includes ample prerogative to independently draw on and commit to the local, as subject, without suspending participation in international discourses.

Such a dichotomous artistic course could metaphorically be likened to the cyclical journey of that miraculous African seed, whose fertilisation depends upon its passage through the elephant's colon. Its pristine originality remains uncontaminated by this most natural voyage through a nurturing underworld.

And so will five new Samstag Scholars also voyage forth, in 1997, to stretch and test themselves in bracing engagement with the chaotic global leviathan.

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[Zhong Chen's](#) deft renderings of landscape from the southern Flinders Ranges would by themselves demonstrate his grasp of Australian cultural issues. An emigrant from Zhongshan, China, Chen has claimed a view long colonized by the European, yet unremarked by oriental eyes.

That this might seem exotic would ignore the preponderance of landscape in traditional Chinese art and, more poignantly, the long history of emigration by Chinese people to the Australian bush.

By placing himself iconographically against this laden background, Chen lifts his subject matter to a social commentary on isolation and difference. Parodically laughing the Chinaman's mute, stock-in-trade smile, he becomes an exemplar of cultural ambiguity and camouflage.

[Rozalind Drummond](#) deploys photographic forms of representation in carefully staged, theatrical displays and installations, invoking psychological dimensions associated with voyeurism, a long-standing subject of her investigations.

Conventionally ascribed to morbid sexuality and the male gaze, voyeurism could be understood as the vicarious and compulsive observation of fellow humans as sexual objects, in which - often risking ignominy - the watcher typically remains distanced and unobserved, the object unselfconsciously natural and thus libidinous.

Curiously complicit with her subject and able to skilfully procure the erotic, Drummond nevertheless controls her material in such a way that the audience remains anxious and uncertain, suspending gratification. In *Peeping Tom* - inspired by British filmmaker Michael Powell - Drummond's found and then manipulated images of women are presented through characteristically sociopathic modes of voyeurism - surveillance, recording and collecting - in an oppressive forensic fiction which ultimately confronts the viewer.

[Julie Gough's](#) allegorical assemblages work principally to subvert the historical misrepresentations of Aboriginal peoples - both generic and particular - which have become reified or stereotyped in the popular mind. A worldly and scholarly adventurer whose walkabouts rival *Boy's Own*, Gough took up art after a near-fatal but inspirational collision with a huge eagle, while riding pillion in outback, north Western Australia.

Her method - enhanced by earlier studies in pre-history and English - is to critically rework the assumed meanings of historical stories and cultural forms, and in the retelling, present these as beguiling deconstructions, visually enriched by a well-judged fondness for found bric-a-brac and kitsch ephemera.

Gough, sensitively attuned by her own cross-cultural credentials, builds her narratives sleuth-like from garnerings of eavesdroppings, absences and peripheral vision, taking care to not trespass, but determined also "to dislodge the evidence no-one thought to remove, or even knew was there".

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One theory of human evolution has a seed-eating hominid, *Ramapithecus*, as the crucial ancestor of *Homo sapiens*, leaving the forests ten million years ago to develop the dexterities and uprightness which then distinguished him from other animals of comparable intelligence. Along the way, human dependence on animals - for their utilitarian value as food, clothing, tools and labour - has been well-nigh absolute. And although our timeless relationship with them often elevates animals socially to the status of servile companions and, culturally, as mock humans in myths and moral fables (witness *Babe*), they are more fundamentally understood and fixed from the aloof perspective of anthropocentrism.

[Steven Holland](#) apprehends these assumptions, inviting us to considerably explore and contemplate the otherness of non-human lives and also, through this, our disengaged relationship to nature. In *The Fox and The Moon's Reflection*, the strewn fibre-glass corpses of feral animals, layered with pale band-aids, evoke both the actual predicament of introduced animals in Australia and our tethered European connection to them, socially and culturally.

Past Tense / Future Tense recasts the suffocated Pompeii dog in multiples of prototypical death, the usual condition of all Holland's animals. These dead dogs, museologically sorted, shelved and classified, illustrate the canon of empirical separation.

The mystical notion that life exists independently of the transient organisms which constitute its physical manifestations, can be seen at the core of [Lyndal Jefferies'](#) investigations and representations of the human body. She conceives of the human organism and its parts, more in metaphysical terms than as the corporeal body posited and dissected by medical science.

In the way that matter might be reductively pursued to its incarnation as pure energy, so Jefferies would acquaint us with alternative considerations of our own physical constitution. In the installation *Amorphous Organ*, she presents a range of human organs handsomely sculpted in cast aluminium. These elegant, flaccid and shimmering objects re-interpret the prescribed organisation of the body and are instead offered as independently viable entities, a simulation of individuation.

With *Amorphous Organ (Pool)*, Jefferies creates an object from water, oil and powdered aluminium, whose reflective surface "self-heals" when broken. *Pool's* transparent suggestion of bathing, counterpoints the western preoccupation with hygiene against a more sublime allegory of spiritual cleansing.