

1999 Samstag essay

Back to the Future - From Wry to Rave

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Stretch. Yawn. Turn the calendar and click on box "next century."

In decades to come, 1999 will just be another transitional year, a date to haggle over at conferences and pubs. For now, inching towards 2000 compels feverish millennial minds to either wax utopic or study the Roman timetable for apocalyptic signs to warn us that the end is near. For the calmer souls, we can rest easily on the insightful commentary offered by esteemed Harvard philosopher of science Stephen Jay Gould who reminds us that "[m]illennial questions record our foibles, rather than nature's dictates, because they all lie at the *arbitrary* end of this spectrum [my italics]".¹ Remembering that the term *millennium* etymologically refers to a period of one thousand years, we are thus encouraged to read *century* portals as fictive doorways, funhouse thresholds that shove us into infinity or which scare us into thinking we're too fat or too grotesque to walk through.

Of course when it comes to making and marketing art with a capital A, we don't need millennial madness to unearth post-modern ennui or reinforce the modernist anxiety many of us (admittedly) still feel in trying to predict the rhythms of the emerging NOW. Indeed, our power to think 'back to the future' might eventually look like some weird form of sundial worship when turn of the century discussions of art roll around.

In the case of the **1999 Anne & Gordon Samstag International Visual Arts Scholarships** awards, we're clearly looking at something more than curatorial genuflection. Sure, recognition of artistic moxie, curiosity and vision has all been accounted for; however this year, we're looking at a group of artists whose concerns and works summarize some of the strongest globalizing tendencies of twentieth-century artistic production both in Australia and abroad. From the high and wry rationalism of neo-modernist abstraction and conceptualist punning to the messy irrationalities of painterly abstraction and computer generated video performance production. The only glaring omission from the group is figure painting, which has risen from the dead in L.A. and New York though it never left Bombay.

The viewer will undoubtedly find this International Art consistency thrown into relief by a strange, arresting mix of talents and intentions that thankfully give ironic commentary and heart-felt grief equal footing in a contemporary arts matrix. I don't mean this lightly, for if one considers the artistic perspectives of the eight Samstag Scholars in light of a world-wide discussion of art, one sees the shrewd and sensitive ways in which these artists have negotiated home-grown experience and channelled the 'will to make stuff' in spite, or in honor of International art's economy and boundaries - boundaries which themselves were once indeterminate and now hardened by scholastic calcification rites, regardless whether they are practiced in Melbourne, London or Hanoi. In other words, the work of this year's Samstag recipients is at once reassuring and appropriately unnerving, as if the whole group were perched on a ledge of one set of histories, overlooking another that has yet to begin. And as a *Yank* looking *down undemeath* the surface of eight, academy-informed, Australian art practices, I'm hard-pressed to wonder if nationality really has anything to do with making art, unless we're confronted with the particularities of Australian parody, as captured by Nicholas Folland or the subtleties of self-determination that we see knotted through the work of Vietnamese expatriate Hanh Ngo. Politics of the State, for the moment, are now framed by the culture of Art.

I think it is worth mentioning in this regard that the 1999 Samstag Scholars prove the slow but inevitable breaking up of the European and American power base in art and the repositioning of the Asian-Pacific academy - an inevitable fact Mr. Samstag intuitively anticipated in his bequeathed foundational support. At the same time, we can take note of the North Americanizing influence upon Australian artists, especially the aura that New York still casts upon 'the young and the restless.' In the eyes of precocious **Kristian Burford**, for instance, the Big Apple still looks like the centre of the artistic universe -- well, at least his artistic universe which feeds on sculptural hyper-realism and urban decadence, and which is cosmologically constructed around fictive and poetic excess. Perhaps influenced by New York's Robert Gober and Eric Fischl, Burford's cunningly orchestrated *mise en scene* punctures our mundane reality with charged psycho-sexual taboo, the sort that easily conforms itself to a Lacanian analysis of soft porn literature or film. But worry not, *12:17pm: Melissa...* is a user-friendly installation that monumentalizes the orgasmic, self-feeding female body as an ordinary prop of mod living and allows just enough theory and perversity of subject-object relations to keep the author, protagonist and viewer on the edge.

In an era of Lolita and butch feminism, Burford's deadpan melodrama squeezes the juice, so to speak, out of a stacked (oops!) gender argument but remains an adolescent fantasy nonetheless. (They'd love him in L.A.). This becomes particularly apparent when one considers the work of the two women Samstag Scholars, **Deborah Paauwe** and Hanh Ngo. Paauwe, who also looks to New York City as her next Mecca, throws Burford's Peeping Tom perspective into relief with her highly personal surveillance of family photographs. Photography, after all, is burdened with the surreptitious posture of voyeurism and in Paauwe's case, the step toward public scrutiny of her mother's photo album achieves a pop patois of hidden Chinese identity. In works like *Blue Tights or From the Waist Down*, photography capitulates to Paauwe's personal iconography of Australasian identity. It isolates rather than integrates signs of unspoken family memories. Paauwe says it frames an experience never had "first hand." She and we know that photographs are not the only things that lie.

Hanh Ngo, like Paauwe, is motivated to grapple with the discrepancies of autobiographical reconstruction. Ngo, however, resists the cool, seductive remove of photographic documentation to find an earthier, and ultimately more

controversial means of "decoding" fragments of Vietnamese Diasporic memory. She offers up pieces of richly pigmented tapestries, hand-crafted with signs and decorative patterns that are dislocated from their linguistic grammar, from a literature that knits social drama and poetic tragedy out of human grunts, shrieks and sighs. Here Ngo speaks of both Vietnamese and Australian language, giving voice to the alienated *Viet Kieu*, a Vietnamese expatriate, an outsider to her country of origins, an insider to her land of emigration. Caught in complex warp of past and present, Ngo defiantly weaves an indigenous Vietnamese craft tradition into International Art practice, in order to capture the texture and history of psychological dislocation: In Vietnam, tapestry weaving is ascribed a low status and practiced specifically by females; in the cosmopolitan circles of contemporary high art - well, we all know painting on canvas is really a textile art and that decoration has been recuperated by women and men who sew.

Ah, the question of high and low! You'd think that scuzzy pulp fiction and back-pocket politics had put this one to rest. But in matters of world art, the fine-folk dialectic has made it through centuries of discussion and it seems there's no stopping it now.

That is, unless we're talking about the messy markings left by **Paul Hoban** on any one of his mixed-media grounds. Everything, yes, everything in a Hoban "paint skin" is levelled to a surface of phenomenological and semiotic observation. Think of an ancient mapping of a central nervous system, a hide that records the origins of the world. Think palimpsest and pentimento. Hoban retrieves the raspy mumblings of shaman chants, once erased by eighteenth-century analysis, now muffled by vogue desires and noisy trash. As the non-official Samstag elder, Hoban reminds us of the visionary lineage of the "outsider" and the cultural nomad in "high" art - Beuys and Pollock - and, in so-called "low" art - Aboriginal symbolic life. Hoban may wish to route his Samstag Scholarship to Los Angeles, home to the plastic-bodied, sushi-loving, cha-cha mamma of pop culture and the Yaqui Indians. One can only imagine his sunny *YEDE*, inspired by Yoruban religion, reworked with rollerblades, chopsticks and tortillas.

Reworking culture also seems to be a preoccupation of **Nicholas Folland**, though I doubt you'll find any expressive marks or metaphysical musings spoiling his bratty, minimalist objects. And as for going native, Folland brings his hip, transnational Gen-X style to bear on national culture, particularly the Australian manufactured landscape and the urban rites which conform dutifully, namely sports. By its own mythologizing standards, Aussieland has set itself apart in world media by using sports culture to train its people in the art of spectatorship and national identity. In *Landscape (Sports Sunday)* Folland seizes upon this myth and wryly plays it according to self-inflicted rules of the tyrannical architectural grid: Governance of space equals governance of power.

Folland's sculptural satire is especially eerie if you stop to consider its relation to **Stephen Bram's** architecturally inspired, neo-modernist studies of paint. At the beginning of the decade, Bram gained national recognition for his participation in reintroducing early European modernist theories of composition into the international chatter about the re-resuscitation of abstract painting. Now aligned with a savvy Amsterdam community of "abstract/conceptual" artists who think past canvas as surface and beyond lines as demarcations of space, Bram excavates architectural environs by applying paint directly to walls. He lets pigment and perspective open up composition, pushing for deliberate architectural and painterly illusion, intending walls and rooms to fly off into one another. The famous Dutch artist Mondrian is said to have meditated for hours on his grids to arrive at his metaphysical program of Neo-Plasticism; Bram brings us up to date on the architectural guidelines of altered states.

Peter Alwast likewise puts geometric abstraction back into the painting argument, but is motivated instead by more hybridizing, post-modern ideals. The youngest of the Samstag group, Alwast approaches '80's New York minimalism with Pop Art in mind, entitling his works *Monster* and *Return of the Living Dead*. Bloated, bumpy, but reduced to simple form, Alwast stuffs his flashy acrylic surfaces with enough silicone to turn a law suit.

While Alwast doesn't speak of cosmetic surgery, he does seem obsessed with the grotesque, which appears to be a preoccupation of an age bred on cyborgs, genetic cloning, and spoon-fed weekly T.V. installments of the paranormal. Matthew Warren is also part of the emerged technopop generation that thrives on spectacle, fragmentary logic and altered psychic experience. In Warren's case, the rave aesthetic translates into a gothic multi-media production, ushering digitalized video and sound performance into a new Romantic age of self-inquiry. Romanticism, as we know, thrives best in brooding, primal landscapes and what could be more *Ur* than the Tasmanian wilds? In Warren's mind, Western Canada runs a close second and so we see his *homage* to TWIN PEAKS, THE X-FILES and to the dark, freaky spaces of imagination paved by the Kafkaesque Canadian filmmaker David Cronenberg.

Hmm. A century of out-of-control art, an epoch of scientific revolution gone wild and science fiction still holds us in its charge. I'd say that's a pretty good guide to the future.

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1. Stephen Jay Gould, *Questioning the Millennium*, New York, Harmony Books, 1997

M. A. Greenstein is a Los Angeles-based art theorist and critic who writes on the idiosyncratic, the beautiful and the grotesque in contemporary world art and performance. Ms. Greenstein is currently on faculty at Art Center College of Design; Otis College of Art and Design; and the Claremont Colleges and works as on tributing editor to World Art Magazine and Asian Art News.