

Samstag: the first millenium

© Ross Wolfe

After providing in his 1989 will for fifteen individuals and some other matters, Gordon Samstag instructed that the balance of his estate be used to establish a trust fund - the 'Fine Arts Grant Fund' - to be held in perpetuity by his United States trustee, and the income from this "made available to fine art students from Australia, so that they may study and develop their artistic capacities, skills and talents in New York, New York and its vicinity, or elsewhere outside of Australia".

Following his death in Florida, USA, in 1990, the start-up value of the Fine Arts Grant Fund was over US \$5m, and it has since grown.

An American citizen, Samstag also proposed that the selection of recipients for his scholarships be managed by his old employer, the South Australian School of Art. Mr Samstag's implicit faith in the School, where he taught from 1961-70, must have been a key factor in his decision to assist Australian artists in so marvellous a way.

The magnanimity of his truly historic scheme, also suggests that Samstag's well-known reputation for difficulty as a colleague and, in his teaching role as an agent provocateur, was grounded in a benign intention to stimulate those around him. Certainly, with the privileged insight of his urbane and international background, he would have been struck on his arrival in Australia, in the very early 1960s, by the limiting isolation of antipodean cultural life.

Nevertheless, it was a culture that he clearly liked. That he was motivated, well after returning to America, by so ambitious a vision to bridge the distance between Australia and other art-making centres, suggests a high regard indeed for Australia and its artists.

Though flexible in important respects, Samstag's will was prescriptive in certain aspects; for example, in the structure of the selection panel, and that in each year in which more than one scholarship grant is made, one grant at least must be made to an applicant who is resident in South Australia. And by comparison with many so-called travelling scholarships – where the enormous real cost of overseas study usually diminishes the scope of such schemes – Mr Samstag's scholarship was profoundly generous in conception, paying for all the costs of study, including return airfare and institutional fees for twelve months of study (with a possible six month extension), along with a substantial living allowance reflecting his aspiration that the Samstagers 'travel and work under comfortable, though not extravagant conditions'.

Because the Samstag Scholarship emphasises post-graduate study at overseas institutions, it would appear to have no Australian equivalent in scale, although the small Chanter Bequest Scholarship (of the late Marjorie Francis Chanter, who died in 1951), for an outstanding graduate of the South Australian School of Art to study in Europe, must be noted. Other precedents are the worthy, though modestly funded NSW Travelling Scholarship and the long abandoned Peter Brown Memorial Scholarship, created by the Australia Council in the 1970s.

The first national call for applications was made by the University early in 1992 and inaugural scholarships were subsequently awarded to ten artists, who will commence their overseas projects from 1993. These ten 'Class of 93' artists, are the subject of this exhibition. The historic character of the first awards suggests that a properly documented exhibition will provide a valuable archival record - and a touchstone for prospective applicants.

The inaugural Samstag 'scholars' are all different - as diverse as the art of our time - and sharing in common only the distinction of being the first recipients of scholarships. Indeed, there is no Samstag 'style', and it is certain that, over time, the fullest range of expressions in contemporary art-making will be rewarded, along with the widest geographic spread of national origins and international destinations. Also, as it happens, five of the first Samstag artists are women, five of them are men, indicating only that one of the characteristics of Australian art-making today is its balance in gender strengths.

* * *

A few brief insights into some of the artists' concerns and motivations may be helpful.

Though his Samstag work provides only an indicator, film-making is integral to **Shane Carn's** objectives. To Carn, film remains conceptually a visual art, with the added benefit of its complexity and power to engage the viewer. He cites the Chilean film-maker Raul Ruiz as an example of a visual artist who, through film, creates a view of reality that is not constructed by narrative.

At their most simple level, **Robert Cleworth's** accomplished paintings bring sexuality to the absolute foreground, with a seeming celebration of fornication and the carnal marriage of flesh on flesh. The figures shown are always fragments and juxtaposed with benign other elements such as clouds, landscapes and, through the quotation of abstract painting, notions of high art.

Cleworth acknowledges that he is implicated in the subject matter of his work. However, the intellectual basis of his investigations is an objective interest in issues of censorship, in feminist discourses on pornography, and in the phenomenon of societal polarisation around issues of sexuality.

Sally Cox's large flower paintings reconstruct a scientific botanical art associated with Australia's colonisation, as metaphor for the position of women who have traditionally been subject to the representations of "outsiders". However,

by appropriating this European "outsider" view of Australia, imbuing it with layers of new meaning and, furthermore, by celebrating its decorative possibilities, Cox symbolically reclaims and affirms the centrality of her own female identity.

Identity is the principal concern of **Mark Hislop**, both in a personal sense (he was born a twin), but equally with regard to notions of nationality. In this respect Hislop contends that the influential role of landscape in the formation of Australian national identity warrants close attention.

Hislop's paintings present appropriated, classic Australian landscapes (for example, in *Site I*, John Glover's *Boy's Asylum, Tasmania*), subordinated to a dichotomous and discordant grid of tachist squares (perhaps arranged in the form of a deliberately ambiguous modernist cross) which interrupt the "illusion" of an increasingly diminished, third-degree background image.

Only one generation removed from her Irish heritage, **Jacqueline Hocking** has a keen sense of the connection between Australian post-colonial history, and the rift between Irish and English, this informing her interest in issues of class and social division.

Hocking takes large quantities of domestic dinnerware, some of it intact - much of it broken remnants - and systematically encodes each plate or shard with phrases and words such as "class", "structure", "order" and "system". Now processed into their classifications and subservient order, the plates and shards are immaculately boxed and presented, forming a paradigm of the way in which society sets up systems to categorise itself.

The principles of hermetic philosophy drive everything in **Nigel Jamieson's** three-dimensional conjurings. In the unpredictable, arbitrary manner of the archetypal Fool, Jamieson toys with his objects and their placement until latent meaning emerges and is alchemically discovered, recognised, reified.

In *Temperance*, built on the geometry of a spiral, the structure is so tenuously fabricated and kinetically charged that it may fall at any moment. Yet, transcendently, like nature with its balancing flow of opposites, it achieves a self-supporting harmony.

Ruth McDougall is conscious that her preferred medium, weaving, occupies an especially marginal position in contemporary artmaking. However, for McDougall, this quality is a virtue, paralleling her own sense of self and struggle with the extreme condition of anorexia nervosa - the constant subject of her work. A consequence of over-control more so than incapacity, the "refusal-to-eat" is grandly analogous to the outsider in society, the person who is unwilling or unable to enter the mainstream.

With survival at stake and suffocated by the desire to "take to the bed and give up on the world", McDougall acts to transform "refusal" into a resistance of further decline and the tendency to refuge. Using the satisfying and meditative discipline of weaving in works such as *Isness* (based on the image of an anorexic), she manifests and wrestles with her dark angel.

In her playful, but gently instructive installation, *Misenchancement*, **Sally Mannall's** consistent theme of gender is explored for fresh insights. Through the use of familiar, though symbolically loaded images from popular culture, Mannall contrives to involve the viewer experientially with her real project - a sharp investigation of the way in which cultural mythology and history construct gender roles in society.

Placed along one side of a corridor, five Topsy Turvy dolls (e.g. Little Red Riding Hood, Goldilocks, Alice in Wonderland) are paralleled by five Mills and Boon novels. Encouraged to twirl the dolls, the viewer discovers "growler" wolves, bears, beasts and frogs ambiguously beneath their skirts. Released, Goldilocks reasserts her upright position.

Ruth Marshall is engrossed in the process of working with steel. She loves the incisive cut of the acetylene torch and the bubbling explosion and smoke as heated metal hits water. However, the satisfaction of materials and three-dimensional form are insufficient on their own; she also wishes to employ two-dimensional images which express her deep fascination with people, and the world of dreams and ideas.

In her ambitious work *Book* (and acknowledging her debt to Anselm Kiefer's *High Priestess*), Marshall fabricates a weighty structure that, like the covers of a great and ancient book, encloses copious metal pages, old and worn. On these are writ the images of her life.

Roger Noakes finesses steel with the virile confidence and shrewd humour of a village blacksmith. Equally capable of ephemeral or monumental conceptions, particularly in his public works, life's timing has more recently led Noakes to focus on a smaller scale of studio object which adeptly, with serendipity, blends found and fabricated metals into diverse narratives.

Purged of the conventions of formalism and feeling fecund and liberated in the post-modern environment, his particular interest is political, social and gender themes - his position invariably subversive. For example, while recognising genuine validity in the feminist claim for change in social balances, he is unable to restrain a response of gentle provocation and "assertion-of-maleness", indicative of the continuing desire by men for women sexually.