

Chaos in Heaven

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There is a science fiction story, written well before the popularising of chaos theory, in which a time traveller, returning from a brief tourist visit to the age of dinosaurs, discovers that the present has changed. Among many differences, the language of his 'new' present is unfamiliar. Though similar, things are not what they were.

During his sojourn, the traveller has wandered off the approved track. Only later does he discover the crushed insect stuck to his boot, which, removed from its own present, has altered the equation of evolution, over aeons.

The potential longevity of the in-perpetuity **Anne & Gordon Samstag International Visual Arts Scholarships**, gives rise to similar thoughts of its likely impact over time, perhaps more-modestly measured as a future millennium of positive interventions, rather than an aeon of absence.

When Gordon Samstag wrote down the principles which were to govern his scholarships program, he made no suggestion that the work of scholarship recipients should be displayed, or promoted in an exhibition. Certainly, the application of his vision - to assist Australian artists to study and develop their artistic skills outside of Australia - was to be accountable. But it was also to be simple and uncomplicated - a relatively unconditional gesture of pure largesse.

There is also some evidence that Mr Samstag did not foresee the magnitude of his own bequest, and that its large value would facilitate so many awards annually. Nor, perhaps, that there would be high national interest in a scholarships program which, by virtue of its enormity, would immediately establish itself in the vanguard of Australian visual art awards.

For this reason and because he also required that the scholarships be well promoted, the Samstag exhibition has been devised as a window into the program. At least for the first couple of years, it will provide an easy measure for what the awards are about.

Besides illuminating the purpose of the Samstag Program, the exhibition offers incidental publicity benefits to the artists, especially to those who, thus far in their careers, have had little public exposure. After all, at least half of this year's Samstag scholars could fairly be described as new players in town. Gordon Samstag would be pleased.

The catalogue - disseminated to the profession nationally - is an especially important part of witnessing the artists' distinguished achievement, a permanent record of their accomplishment. It may be that the catalogue will in future be the more frequent document of the awards - the exhibition an occasional highlight.

The Samstag exhibition is not a survey. With at most just a few works by each artist, it is simply an indication of work judged to be of worth - an eclectic report on candidates whose claim for further development has been more compelling or persuasive than others. This is not without interest.

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As one of a plethora of institutional forces 'benignly' at work on the space of Australian visual arts, the role of the Samstag Scholarship is distinct.

Notwithstanding the indispensable function of the marketplace, it is our large institutional infrastructure which is now principally resourcing the constant cycle of expositions, the encouragement of artists, and the promotion of discourse. This is not just a stimulation of great magnitude - it is the very game itself. A determining force.

Artists flocking to this crucible-of-fortune can be forgiven if the distinction between experiment, inquiry and opportunity is sometime blurred. Furthermore, things change. Artists are intensifying their efforts to negotiate a path from modernism. Programmatic methodologies abound. The splendidly resilient organism of visual arts is engaged, and may yet be overwhelmed by the diversity of its own possibilities.

In this context, the Samstag Scholarship is less concerned with the stimulation of artists, than with their further development through the opportunity of a secure and lengthy period of study overseas. This constitutes an investment in future Australia culture, through contributing to the maturity of its artists. Without such benefits, Australian artists will be starting a long way behind their international peers.

Fortunately, artists can be relied upon to make sense of the conditions which apply in their time. There are no rules - there is no crisis. The Samstag artists exemplify this.

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The invocation of sexuality in [Lynne Barwick's](#) fleshy, vinyl and rubber fetishisms, is more an allusion than a central doctrine. Of more particular concern to her is the process by which theory and meaning become objectified in works of art. In this context, the sex-laden surfaces and bumps of her trashy (though costly) materials, remain consciously ambiguous, abetted by humour.

Beneath the carefully-determined materiality is a pornology of obsessive detailing, repetition, excess and revulsion.

The gender materiality in [Michele Beevor's](#) soft, domestic sculptures, by contrast serves a different purpose. In previous work, Beevors fabricated enormous simulations of household attics, stairs and laundries, gorged with the stuff

of women's domestic labour - a congestion of greying plastic and biodegradable Zeitgeist. These spent suburban corpses, denuded of their superficial sheen, mirrored the repressed underbelly of all our lives - the mundanity of our consumption and domestic practice.

In her latest work, *Fowlerware*, Beevors shifts her gaze to other household signifiers. For example, a pink-sponge toilet and cistern is an absurd Duchampian vessel. Crammed with shavers, it sags with imminent saturation - an icon of our dependence.

Although of cordial personal disposition, [Matthew Calvert's](#) wooden sculptures have a temperament of unmistakable hostility. Labouring on the English/French channel tunnel with Irish workmates for several months in 1990, Calvert was moved by their spirit and drawn with fascination to the culture of violence in Northern Ireland. It was not the conflict itself which engaged him, but the driving passions and belligerence of its participants. The response of people to violence - moreso than violence *per se*.

Early attempts to deal with this subject produced elegant and formal structures of wood, glass and steel - abstractions full of deception, concealment and closure. Calvert's most recent sculpture functions as a barricade which assaults and offends this aesthetic, rendering itself unapproachable through gross physical attributes alone. Its spirit however, is open. As art, it is naked and vulnerable.

That objects engender a life of their own, is a truism of visual culture. The methodical employment of reductive and minimal principles in visual art, invariably rigorous, is often productive of expressionist and poetic effects. It is a phenomenon of such work that these (and other) qualities can be reified, through the ardent adherence to values, over time.

In this context, the formal conventions evident in [ADS Donaldson's](#) monochromatic, non-objective painting, might seem at first viewing to identify themselves as historically-bound, a mere restatement of familiar modernist tenet.

However, Donaldson's objects, though cognizant of their relativities, confront assumption through their very obviousness. Their capabilities and meanings are independent, resistant and elusive. These objects, quietly proffered, yet dynamic with tension, aspire to an original space of meaning and contemporaneity. This space is freshly contingent - its transgressive capacity manifest - challenging complacent perception.

While not compulsive, [Sarah Lindner's](#) strong desire to engage with her audience partly explains the theatricality of her kinetic, or otherwise animated sculptures.

A natural innovator and fecund with ideas, Lindner draws for her subject from personal history, an amalgam of childhood mythologies, family, and the experience of self. These constitute not just a site for exploration, but a domain in which opportunity exists to recover remnants of her gender heritage.

Thus, *Nocturnal Emissions* is a sharp poem on the subject of maternal influence and female individuation, explored through the blood and hair of Rapunzel. (She, confined at menstruation and, with razor, clean of hair is punished.) In *Hymen*, Lindner's stretched membrane deafens in excruciating titillation - a proclamation of her determination to mistress externals, from within.

The apparently arbitrary quality of objects in [Anne Ooms'](#) *The Organic Untruthfulness of Woman*, conceals a reductive methodology of seductive rationality. Ooms' delicious title - a Freudian term for female hysteria (in which libido is displaced rather than experienced directly) - functions as a nurturing womb, begetting progeny.

A text emerges, recalling fantasies of treeless green hills in summer, a black stallion - a city left behind. Loquaciously, the scene enlarges until, decisively, the author forgoes control. Given its own life, the text locates its bare essentials. "A young girl in a warm, large place, beginning a journey."

Of the same genealogy is the parallel conjuring of objects - recognised, found and seized. These sibling objects are but the signs of themselves - mere shells - a simulacrum of narrative, eloquently refined and opaque.

In cyberspace, the body disappears - duality is transcended. The "virtual" world engendered by computers is, in some aspects, already manifest. That science and technology are currently driving a momentous change in society - more significant than that of the industrial revolution - is of major interest to [Robyn Stacey](#). Her large and spectacular computer-manipulated cibachrome prints, have long demonstrated the distance travelled in photographic depiction of 'place'. These images have shown, for example, the 'nowhere' space of the anonymous city, made possible by the flattening out of unspecific events and images into a single object frame, presenting simultaneous points of view, from above and below.

Her very recent digital, cibafilm montages, produced in the USA during a residency at the Beckman Institute for Advanced Science and Technology, Chicago, draw on images which refer to the evolution of scientific vision since the Renaissance. These focus attention on history's big movements, as distinct from its transience. Robyn Stacey reminds us that in cyberspace - the world inside computers - you can become anything. That the future, perhaps, will be innerspace, not outerspace.

The elemental corporeality of [Carl Sutherland's](#) painting leaves no doubt of his commitment to subject - the legacy of a geological profession. That former life involved extended periods of fieldwork in remote Australian locations, imbuing

Sutherland with a deep and poetic appreciation for the structure and form of landscape - an appreciation enriched by his morphological objectiveness.

The unique materiality of geophysical forms and the processes of fossilization pervade Sutherland's work, alternately slate-scratched, dark and scathed - then volcanically tactile, and grave with physical weight.

In modernism, the black monochrome constitutes a logical and pure reduction of elements to their most essential form - a space of nothingness. This space, often considered one of nihilism, is seminal, full of propagative qualities. The luminescence of [Paul Uhlmann's](#) paintings has its origin in such a space, where the complete absence of light (Finsternis) must by definition imply its opposite. Early paintings such as *Light of Nature* suggest physical representations of evanescent light, stellar emanations in celestial voids.

However the conceptual space of Uhlmann's light is not constituted by its physical atmosphere alone. For example, in *Field and Wounds*, the concept of metaphysical light is explored through the sublime metaphor of the Wounds of Christ, an affirmation of transcendence and passage.

The first conspicuous feature in [Anne Wallace's](#) representational painting is its independence from the prevailing discourses of contemporary art. For Wallace, the intellectual domain of her own ideas is more compelling - a site for non-subservient exploration of creativity.

Another feature of her work is its still-evolving style, an articulate amalgam of influences (for example, the 'solid' quality of Spencer and Balthus). Although welcoming of the natural evolution in technique which occurs through habitual practice, Wallace's stylistic objective is a non-expressive flatness and stillness, in which the tactile quality is subordinate - the meanings ascendant.

Finally, despite a very considerable power to engage, Wallace's subjects resist the viewer's desire for resolution. The consequent tension in her work is subtle, sustained by the rich imagery and the initial promise of explicit narrative meanings.

Yet, in all her paintings, whether they speak of loss, marginality, rebellion or containment, the real subject remains concealed - a lure of implicit possibilities and ambiguities.