

Samstag's Class of '96

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Gordon Samstag clearly believed that an international perspective is fundamental to mature visual arts practice. His own well-travelled background was urbane, reflecting the dimensions of his hometown - New York, New York.

In devising the program which would so dramatically express his strong belief in Australian artists, Samstag's primary instinct - characteristically disruptive - was to get artists on the move and away from the familiar. However he also sought a more enduring outcome for his Samstag Scholars than the mere stimulus and pleasure which would derive from itinerant travel.

The Samstag Program is thus founded on a recognition that artists will secure greater developmental benefits in a lengthy period away from Australia, if, with generous financial support, they are engaged in programs of dedicated practice and study.

As a consequence, five artists, all recipients of the 1996 **Anne & Gordon Samstag International Visual Arts Scholarships** documented in this catalogue, are presently negotiating their preferred programs of study with institutions overseas. For twelve months of study, they will each receive a tax-free stipend of \$28,000 (Australian) in addition to return airfares and the cost of institutional fees. Those familiar with the prohibitively high cost of overseas study will know that it is not unusual for institutional fees at leading institutions to exceed \$20,000 Australian, per annum.

The selection committee for the 1996 Samstag Scholarships - Max Lyle (Head, South Australian School of Art) Barrie Goddard (Senior Lecturer at the School) and, performance and installation artist, Lyndal Jones - have been required to distinguish among the large national field, those candidates whose claim for further development is most compelling. In this conscientious process, the qualities of individual works, regardless of their media, are exhaustively measured for skill in execution and for achievements aesthetically, or in concept and meaning. The committee also evaluates the overall body of work presented for its consistency of values and intent.

The written proposal which candidates articulate in support of their work and study project, may also be persuasive. In this way, **John Kelly's** paintings which at first seem wholly defined by their humour, are revealed as serious, delightfully ambiguous investigations of Australian World War II camouflage artists; for example William Dobell's role in the production of papier-mache cows. ("Said Bill, I think the authorities underestimate the eyesight of the Japanese airmen").

Nor are **John R. Neeson's** apparently orthodox representations entirely what they seem. Employing the mimetic strategy of trompe l'oeil, Neeson skilfully demonstrates the inexhaustible capacities of two-dimensional painting, in disciplined works of meditative power, which replicate the very sites in which they are installed.

Nike Savvas' often-beautiful ensembles comfortably resist descriptive reduction, conceived as they are on a layered platform of critical enquiry, for example of form, colour and language. Operating ostensibly through abstract, coded and formalist methodologies, Savvas also invests her work with historical and allegorical references, sometimes redolent of her Greek and migrant heritage.

The dimensions of her practice are well communicated in Untitled, a 1994 installation which functions not only as ironic metaphor for the 19th century colour theory of Seurat, but, in its extraordinary kinetic effect, as a kind of celebration of post-modern upheaval.

The visceral charge emanating from **Kathy Temin's** impossible objects is not simply the consequence of their calculated absurdity. Where Wittgenstein's celebrated either/or image of a duck/rabbit succinctly illustrated our perceptual inability to entertain dual concepts and images simultaneously, Temin's "duck, rabbit and corner problems" overload us with a wilful excess of anarchic reference, plundered openly from the chapter and verse of modernism.

Yet, these stitched, stuffed, sprayed, housed and packaged objects transcend their diminished signifiers and are liberated, wise things, suffused with their author's overarching creativity. More visibly of late, they also reflect a determination to witness her own Jewish history - as daughter of a holocaust survivor and tailor.

The journey which artists take, over time, is sometimes unexpectedly distinguished by abrupt change in the methods and mores of their art making. The propensity of artists to courageously enter new conceptual terrain is of course the very stuff of innovation, without which evolution does not occur.

A ceramic artist of reputation and considerable sensibility, **Angela Valamanesh** has responded to this impulse for change, firstly by enlarging her vocabulary of materials into sculptural objects of mixed media and, more recently, by extending these ambitiously as installation. In Birds Have Fled, the narrative is constructed not as explicit meanings, but as 'felt' apprehensions of metaphysical space, transition and loss. In this, a universe of pleasurable darkness permeated with the translucent blue of a back-lit quotation from Colette, is punctured by stellar islands of white light. A door is slightly ajar - a corner is piled with remnant anthropomorphous shells - a body is swallowed by the wall.

Finally, by once more rewarding a diversity of visual art practices, the selection committee have confirmed that there is no 'Samstag style'. Nonetheless, joined by chance in Gordon Samstag's beneficent scheme, the heterogeneous practices of his 'Class of '96' could be said, almost, to converge.