

## 2001 Samstag essay

### Art and Research

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The Samstag Class of 2001 is notable for the mix of ages and range of experience (both inside and outside the art world) of the recipients. Many of these artists have identified specific technical training or the challenge of a period of critical examination of their work amongst an international peer group (both fellow students and staff) as what they are seeking from their time overseas, rather than the more generalised appeal of a different cultural context.

Yet the attraction of overseas study remains, as it always has been for the Australian artist, access to the 'motherlode' of cultural resources (museums and collections) available in international centres and a (sense of) closer proximity to the critical mass of activity that defines the contemporary art world.

International interaction and exchange occurs today at a range of levels involving a cross-section through the strata that make up the art world. This broadening out of activity is generally seen as a positive thing, but it brings with it a fear of the homogenisation associated generally with globalisation. As artists become 'citizens of the world', will they begin to constitute a class on their own, having more in common with each other regardless of what metropolitan centre they actually come from? And will they be more interested in talking to each other than to the local communities from which they spring?

Arguably, in the global context, the connection between an artist's work and where they come from (place and situation) matters only in so far as it functions to establish a signature 'personal identity'. This year's ten Samstag Scholars are undertaking study related to extending their art practice - and however analytical or theoretically informed that is, or socially focussed - it still circulates in our society as 'individual personal expression'.

One of the significant questions provoked for me in considering the context of these scholarships is the relationship of visual arts practice to the culture of research within the University. How does the development of 'individual expression' relate to the idea of research as part of a collective project which is monitored by some idea of verifiability? What stands in the visual arts as 'an original contribution to knowledge'? What is the difference - a distinction we may want to hold on to - between the practising artist and the academic researcher? Is research an appropriate term for the type of activity artists engage in?

What characterises much contemporary practice, as seen in the work of the 2001 Samstag Scholars, is a syncretic methodology: the combination of ideas, techniques and materials to make connections that cross over the logical or rational boundaries between categories of object or systems of thought.

Undoubtedly this activity has what could be termed 'knowledge effects', but not ones that sit comfortably, in my understanding, within academic traditions. Of course, these traditions are themselves changing - if not already changed. The idea of rigorous analysis through an irreproachable 'objectivity', is giving way to the idea of knowledge or understanding (both in the sciences and the humanities) as culturally relative, observer-dependent and driven as much by a creative searching through anomalies and ambiguities (the personal or subjective description of experience included), as by a progressive movement forward.

The issue of what constitutes 'research' in the creative arts is high on the agenda: in September a new initiative was announced between the Australia Council and the Australian Research Council, to work jointly through the impasse created by 'mismatched models of research and professional practice'.<sup>1</sup> In considering the work of the Samstag Class of 2001 we might think not only of how their art might be framed as research, but how the frame of research might need to be shifted to accommodate it.

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Clothes are the means by which culture wraps the body: this interface is the site of the work of [Christine Collins](#). In *White Lies* she has fashioned the vestments of high office (cloak and crown) out of miniature plastic toy soldiers. The disjunction between the larger picture and the detail makes the point: underlying the beauty, stature and magnificence of the powerful figurehead is warfare, and death for many.

Collins uses textile-like processes: repeated elements are linked together, setting up a relationship between the overall image and underlying pattern. Made out of electronic resistors hooked together, the chain-mail fabric of *Dress* turns down the volume of heavily didactic political comment in preference for a pun: electronic code/social code. This work indulges a sensual interaction between materials and the implied corporeal form of the body. The shimmering veil of *Dress* conjures the sensuality of material moving over form, the interaction of texture and shape.

Using an absurdist logic that joins together things belonging to different categories, the project of [Shaun Gladwell](#) is loose canon anarchic. Historical cultural material, contemporary technologies, and the urban landscape are boiled up together in his pot. The result, in Gladwell's own words: 'John Glover would have made excellent skateboards in his spare time'.

Gladwell is interested in the creative distortions resulting from the transmission of images and ideas between different cultural zones and historical periods. In *Warped Wood*, he juxtaposes a Glover painting (an image that has been digitally copied and compressed along the horizontal axis and then repainted) with two custom-made skateboards.

Building on the superficial connection between the curved lines of a typical Glover tree, and a skateboard's bent plywood deck, Gladwell sees a parallel between the two cultural activities. The distortion of natural form in Glover's paintings is mirrored in the way in which the skateboarder recodes the urban landscape, reassigning or distorting the use-value of urban architecture: 'the hand-rail becomes a slippery dip.'

A champion 'freestyle' skateboarder, in the video *Kickflipping Flâneur*, Gladwell draws a connection between the activity of the skateboarder in the contemporary urban city and the Modernist hero of the nineteenth century city, Baudelaire's flâneur, 'strolling/rolling incognito through the city'. The compelling, yet curious, works resulting from these wide-ball associations make a convincing argument for the 'wrong science' school of art.

The work of **Glenys Hodgeman** has developed directly out of her 'day-job' as an organ transplant co-ordinator. Her experience with organ donation - often referred to as 'the gift of life' - provoked an interest in the broader notion of gift-giving in social practice, the economy of the relationship, its forms and meanings. Through both her experience and research Hodgeman concludes that a gift is not, as commonly thought, a gratuitous legacy, but a complex system of mutual obligations, very much part of the fabric of social bonding.

The work *Legacy* recycles a crocheted tablecloth made for and given to Hodgeman by her grandmother. Hodgeman dissected the cloth which was worn and stained through the passage of time and use, reconstructed it and crocheted connecting parts to make a range of donor organ body parts: lungs, kidneys, heart and so on, finally painting the cotton with gouache. The intricate delicacy of the crochet filigree links with its subject: the complex emotional web involved in the transaction on the part of both gifting and recipient families.

Using a traditional craft technique called quilting, the work *Curtain* was made from paper death shrouds that cover bodies in transport from hospital to the funeral home or mortuary. Hodgeman's use of craftpractices - time-consuming and process-oriented, involving repetitive actions - is part of her own gift-giving in this work. It honours the obligations of the subject's gravity - the weight of responsibility involved in dealing with other people's stories.

The art practice of **Anne Kay** is diverse and utilises a variety of means in response to different situations.

Her materials are usually humble: often found, discarded objects unprepossessing in themselves, and the low-end technology of the slide projector. The conceptual processing which renders them art, is akin to the alchemist's secret of turning base metal into gold.

Invited to participate in *Oblique* - a site-specific art project based in the small town of Otira in the South Island of New Zealand, she took some Sculpee III modelling clay with her. Her *Pocket Mountains* were a response to the landscape encircling the town. Placed on an available car roof they marry with the ubiquitous tourist brochure image of the mirror-lake.

The urban environment is Kay's usual habitat and its issues her subject. After reading an evocative description from the early 1820s of a journey along Paramatta Road, now one of Sydney's most congested and 'dirty' thoroughfares, then edged by a Turpentine Ironbark forest, Kay went in search of remnant bush preserved in a suburban parkland. In *Picture Tree* the image of a Blackbutt Gum, one of the trees she documented, appears on the screen of a plastic bag (now the endemic species of the area) as a luminous memory.

Making-do and allowing for happenstance, Kay's work is provisional by nature; its heroic/pathetic attitude (big themes/modest means) is what packs the punch.

The work of **Fassih Keiso** is located at the point of tension between Middle-Eastern Islamic and Western perceptions of the body and sexuality. Using computer-generated photo-based imagery, his work characteristically fragments the nude female body into a repetitive patterned schema, reminiscent of traditional Islamic patterning but also referencing the grid of Western geometric abstraction.

The detail of these images is bizarre, body parts are divided and flipped into mirror images, inverted and multiplied as in a kaleidoscope. The resultant mounds and bilateral folds are sexually suggestive, reminiscent of seventies feminist 'central core' imagery, but pumped up, hysterical and macabre.

From one point of view the work suggests a play on the Islamic injunction against the representation of the human figure, and a parodic comment on the sublimation of sexual desire into ornament. On the other hand, these mutant bosomy folds, bejewelled and sequined, could be read as parodying the Western fantasy of orientalism as a kind of pornography. The meaning of this work lies somewhere in the crossing between cultures.

The contemporary feel of the work of **Linda Marrinon** comes through its inventive engagement with the past: through the principle of selective affinity she constructs an alternative history of art, something that could have been, but wasn't until now. Her paintings of the early 1990s re-wrote the answers to the formal issues exercising the early Modernism of the School of Paris, through marrying the neo-classical tradition with the comic strip. Her most recent sculptural works suggest the nineteenth century atelier: in materials (terracotta biscuit) and subject (small-scale versions of architectural edifices). The facture of the work plays the idea of the academic sketch off against something more contemporary like 'claymation'; their impressionist spontaneity is barbed with sly humour.

In *Interior of National Gallery* the sculpted scene includes part of a painting. The literal imitation of painting in sculpture, coupled with the 'impressionist' technique of rendering - supposedly an approach to sculpture learned from painting -

constructs an elaborate joke around the idea of 'painterly' sculpture as 'sculptured' painting. Whatever game of references might be at play however, it is clear that Marrinon is just as sincerely absorbed in the logic of making the work, the necessities of technique, and the delight of physical touch: most apparent in her recent figure sculptures.

Growing up Aboriginal in a country town in rural Queensland, **Archie Moore** found words sometimes like a cut or a slap. In the jokey meanness of the playground, racist taunts came in forms that could be simultaneously hurtful and funny, depending on where you stood. This experience spurred an interest in language, as a structural system, and as a form of communication dependent for its sense on cultural context and values.

In his earlier works he explored the arbitrary connection between the phonetic element of language and its assignment of meaning. In these paintings he set up a conundrum juxtaposing the Russian word (a language he was learning at the time) for an object and an image of that thing against its pronunciation transliterated in English.

His later series, *Titled*, recalls and revisits that formative schoolyard experience more specifically. Using pastel on blackboard paint on canvas to mimic an institutional setting, he inscribes one word over another, choosing terms that come from two different points of view or directions and describe two different feelings: "nice" and "nigger", "mum" and "gin". These new composite words are familiar yet strange. They resonate poetically and the formal play of the shapes of the yellow letters outlined in white against a black background holds our attention while we struggle with recognition, and ponder meaning.

Working with computer-manipulated photo-imaging processes the project of **Rea** has been to explore the power relations structuring representations of the black body, in particular the female black body. Photography has been a primary tool of the colonial system from the nineteenth century on, when the eye of the camera first shot and captured 'the other' as ethnographic specimen.

Focusing on representations of the black body in twentieth century popular kitsch, Rea revisits and remakes this history of images, reworking archival photographic material using digital technologies. The role of the viewer is always implicated in her work. We see our own image reflected through the use of mirrors or, as in the self-portrait from the series *EYE/MMABLAKPIECE*, Rea holds the camera to her face, refusing the objectifying gaze and turning it back on us.

In her most recent series she works with a generic image from an old postcard of an Aboriginal man standing naked, holding a spear, shield and spear thrower. (The man in the photo is One Pound Jimmy, an artist and father of the renowned painter Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri.) This image is placed alongside her self-portrait. Superimposed on the top of these images are a gun scope and a shooting range target, making the connection between actual violent attrition against Aboriginal people in our past, and the more persistent cultural violence of misrepresentation.

In the work of **John Spiteri** painting is extended through the medium of video and the logic of installation. His paintings exist in their own right: scenes and objects drawn in outline with a cartoon-like simplicity, and filled in with a limited palette of saturated colours. But through the use of video he develops their narrative impulse.

In *Nightlife* the camera tracks through the painting, now like a stage-set, while the soundtrack provides dialogue between unseen characters. The camera pans an empty streetscape stopping at a lit window, the soundtrack repeats a repertoire of inconclusive conversations between a central protagonist and the people he meets. Installed in the front window of 200 Gertrude Street, the viewer attracted by the lighted window is placed in the same position as the protagonist in the video - drawn in as they pass by, tempted into engagement, breaking off, going home. In this way Spiteri sets up an interaction between the fictive space of representation and the real space of the viewer, blurring the boundary between them.

Similarly, in *Police Line-up*, the viewer is implicated in - caught watching - the line-up of suspects. Spiteri's work is slow-acting and laconic, with a deadpan, wry humour that reels the viewer in.

**Paul White** uses everyday materials in his sculptural installations. Some objects are purchased, but the majority are found. A bric-a-brac of society's detritus - old plastic toys, blankets, lino - the abandoned, leftover and waste are recycled in his work, with a strong formal aesthetic sense governing this reinvestment.

In *Detour* the choice of materials is the magnet firing the conceptual idea behind the work. A ladder with missing rungs stretches from floor to ceiling, a length of white pvc plumbing pipe sprouts a dangerous bouquet of electrical wiring, feeding bulbs made from the bodies of plastic toys, the synthetic colours emanating a noxious sickly glow. Nearby a striped road barrier is propped a-kilter. Reflecting on the construction of the individual within a conformist social system, the structures which attempt to corral, direct and monitor our progress (the ladders, the barriers, the lit ways) are rendered dysfunctional. With wires exposed, the sinister aspect of the circuitry or system is revealed: shoddy facture and questionable ends.

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1. Comment attributed to Academy of Humanities President, Malcolm Gillies, in the joint media release of the Australian Research Council and Australia Council for the Arts, 'New Arts Alliance', 27/9/00.

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