

2003 Samstag essay

The Point of Knowing

© Stephanie Radok

Long for something you can't name, the doctor said, and call it Australia.

The Ancestor Game, Alex Miller, 1992

We live in what the Chinese call interesting times. An uncertainty, an instability, an ongoing sense of crisis and manifold unexpected events make it clear that, contrary to all rumours, history never does end, that in some respects anything can happen and that you have to be there to see what will happen. In this twenty-first century world, the practice of art embraces a renewed awareness of its important role as a part of vast movements of thought and practice, and its responsibility to bear witness, to respond, to go on and simply to be.

Artists in Australia engage in global discourses yet Australian art on a world stage still tends to mean Aboriginal art. In the work of the Samstag Class of 2003 many references are made to Western culture, the artists all deal in the currency of 'world' culture. In this way contemporary art appears to be an international language, or is it global? Does using a 'world' language mean that you may not make or attend to the details of local languages? In the future will our artists become more global, or can they become more Australian?

Constructions of nationality are both fixed and fluid. In the case of Australia it is an ongoing and onerous task to define and describe what is one of the most heterogeneous societies in the world, as around one hundred and fifty ethnicities meet and mix in relatively spacious and peaceful surroundings. In art practice in particular, the richness thus created continues to open new and unexpected levels of activity. The politics of the moment, involving refugee camps and border control, is a rearguard action compared to the long-term connections that have been, and are being made with Australia, by an immense plurality of people. The example set by Australian indigenous people involves intense concern with the local and the specific, adaptability and flexibility, and the incorporation of the new into existing systems.

Samstag Scholarships provide the opportunity for Australian artists to attend art institutions away from Australia, to mingle, to work and to measure their art practices. Some Samstagers may not return immediately to Australia, all will gain a new understanding of both home and away.

As this amazing opportunity for postgraduate study outside Australia takes hold of these seven artists, the question can be asked what will the Samstag Scholars take with them from Australia, what particular elements from here will travel with them to be joined to narratives elsewhere? There is no unity in the work of the seven beyond professionalism and rigour. In the complex and diverse art practices represented here, many disciplines are crossed and re-crossed - architecture, computer modeling, photography, fetishism, drawing, homelessness, the animal world, family history, design, making-do, eroticism, just like in the rest of the world.

Callum Morton's work has been called 'the archaeological recuperation of interred forms and histories'.¹ Part of his art practice involves making two-dimensional digital models and then fabricating these models into three-dimensional scale models. Recent work joins iconic modernist buildings to commercial interests, thus turning the Schroder House in Utrecht into a Toys 'R' Us shop, the Casa Malaparte in Capri into a Spizzico restaurant and the Farnsworth House in Illinois into a 7/11 store.

The global rush of capitalism, to cover the earth with the same products and the same places through franchising, is here seen to work over and around other cultural agendas. The work displays the commercial uptake of modernist ideals in artworks that are strangely compelling.

Morton's research into modernist architecture that once was exclusive and extraordinary but has now become ordinary, even cheap and flimsy, confronts us with the visible movement of history and thus our own passing. Another element included in Morton's three-dimensional works is sound, a device he uses to generate further narrative flows and discontinuities. The computer skills Morton uses for his models are used by both computer game designers and by architects. His work differs from what they do by telling a story against itself, to those able to read it.

Simon Pericich, whose works under discussion here are collaborations with Thea Costantino, is engaged with proving truth through lack of ability, by making something so ordinary it must be real. *If only you could see how much I need you* (2002) is a life-size caravan fitted out with the casual objects generic to ordinary Australians on holiday.

It is made completely from cardboard, held together with tape and painted to match a scuzzy reality, including shiny Mission Brown woodwork. Though ambitious in its scale and detail, the artwork is not ingenious but poignant. Loving but deliberately clumsy, its homeliness embraces no skills except nostalgia and a kind of black humour.

Some of the objects shown, the willow pattern crockery, the Golden Circle can of tinned fruit, hark back to earlier decades but even in today's cosmopolitan Australia these home items remain pretty much the same. The artwork is embedded with a strong sense of its own mortality and was publicly destroyed as a performance event. It is timely in a global sense that, after all, it is poverty - a fairly uncommon topic for art - that is referenced most strongly in Pericich and Costantino's work, for it is poverty that 'lives' rather than 'stays' in a caravan, and it is homeless people who use cardboard to make shelter.

It is curious then that one body of work by **Samantha Small** also concerns itself with the making of domestic spaces from cardboard. Small fabricates the rooms but exhibits only her photographs of them. In *Room Temperature* (2002) five rooms - *Dining, Living, Lounge, Spare* and *Bedroom* - reference the formal aspects of interiors painted by Vermeer. They contain pieces of ordinary floral carpet and patterned wallpaper as well as tiny brooms and cardboard boxes. The scale of the patterns on the wallpaper and carpet give away the illusion of these constructions as much as the corrugated cardboard edges visible at the windows. They suggest rental accommodation and somehow even a dusty smell and unloved aura and yet the light that pours in, always from the left, casts an enthralling warmth within them.

The rooms' ambivalent fragility presents us with a homely/unhomely dichotomy, the uneasiness of cardboard, the hopelessness of their nostalgia. The light that shines into Small's rooms is from an arc lamp, but the light does not need to be natural any more than the rooms need to be life-size to be both potent and memorable. Strangely affecting in their self-sufficiency, the rooms are puzzles, chambers of memories and the desire for manageability and control in an uncertain world.

The design work of **Anke Kindle** draws together the tasks and needs of everyday life with a surreal vision in funky biomorphic furniture with a distinct and animated presence. She is concerned to blur the boundaries between furniture design and sculpture by mixing up methodological approaches and techniques. Furniture is designed around the human form to be functional; sculpture is made in relation to the human body but with no need to be practical. Kindle's work questions the edges of practicality, the limits of utility.

The soft seat sculptures *Anton and Effie* (2001-2002) lie on the floor like bodies we know from a cartoon. From a distance they appear to be made from plasticine, as if they could easily form themselves into a ball and roll away. Then there are *Tulled Lena, Precious March* and *Quilted Venus* (2001-2002), respectively a lipstick mirror, a jewellery storage unit and a clothes stand. Each 1.8 metre object, cast from the same fibreglass mould and respectively ruched with pink tulle, surfaced with smooth shiny aluminium, or quilted with purple satin, is like a large tongue, an organ of extension, friction and potential pleasure. They suggest fetish objects that may have uses other than the ones for which they are signposted.

* * *

Many of the sculptural works made by **John Meade** share a certain surreal fetishistic ground with the work of Kindle. Meade's indefinable objects for indefinable needs *Objects to Live By* (2000) are smoothly chromed, a seductive fashionable finish suggesting both industrial and domestic settings. In a later work one of these objects reappears but it has become pink. Named by Meade *Emotional motif*, this object, a small bollard hung with a ring, is most recently, perhaps finally, manifested in thin dark latex rubber with a ring made from plaited linen thread. The viewer is unlikely to guess it but *Emotional motif* is a three-dimensional model of Jacques Lacan's line drawing of his theory of the topology of the drive. (In brief what goes up must come down.) The object looks like some obscure erotic tool, a giant nipple, or a dummy for a child with a very large mouth.

By making this intellectual diagram three-dimensional, Meade is approaching theory through the body, pushing at making thought palpable and visible, creating simple forms to signify complex and latent layers of thought. The game of the work is to leave the viewer in a confounded state uneasily unaware of what it is that they have seen.

The photographs of **Rebecca Ann Hobbs** also border onto the unknown and the unsaid. *Suck Roar* (2001) is a series of seven self-portraits in which Hobbs pictures herself with a range of creatures from different species. The photographs have been digitally manipulated to intensify their colour thus imitating the hand-colouring of another era, and though they are inkjet prints when exhibited they are framed with great formality. Each highly staged photograph sets up a relationship and suggests some communication between a human and another species - birds, possums, a dog, a squid, a stuffed fox, snails and a spider. The relationships become increasingly strange and attenuated.

Hobbs began the series planning to picture herself as a homeless person, but the imagery of cross-species relationships took over with all its metaphoric potential of investigating and depicting hierarchies of eroticism and power. In the title of the series, *Suck* refers to the feminine element, while *Roar* refers to the animal element. In each photograph Hobbs appears in the centre wearing carefully chosen old clothes with a certain stylish awkwardness. It is almost as if she has restaged documentary photographs of an isolated weird scientist in the fifties or earlier, caught on a Freudian threshold of misunderstanding.

Maria Kontis makes realistic black and white pastel drawings from photographs and from life. Her work embraces an exact semblance, but at the same time manages to make something unearthly or unstable enter the work and slant its apparently straightforward agenda. One way she does this is by including the blur familiar to us from photography, memory or fading light, thus making the viewer strain to see and by extension to understand.

Kontis has recently made a series of drawings called *Photographs that destroyed my life: 1946 -1985* (2002). Included in the series are typical family album images, an adolescent boy, two young men on the beach, two people with a car, a woman, two girls. There is no coherent story which the drawings illustrate; rather, they show moments of suggestive meaning which echo with implied narratives through our experience and memories. When the works were exhibited the artist placed a nineteenth century mahogany table with a worn leather inlay into the room as a private tribute to Jorge Luis Borges. Other works by Kontis depict newspapers and open books of paintings by Vilhelm Hamershoi and Avigdor Arikha. These works contain a surrealist intensity, they project mysterious auras of contemplation, confounding any direct reading.

* * *

1. Max Delany, 'Raising the dead: an interview with Callum Morton', *Like*, Number 10, Melbourne, 1999.

Stephanie Radok recently edited the Place issue of *Artlink* and exhibited in *The Immigrant's Garden* with India Flint at Artspace, Adelaide Festival Centre. She is currently working on a book of essays about contemporary Australian art.