

## 2004 Samstag essay

### New Brew: Export Quality Six-Pack

© Ken Bolton

The Anne & Gordon Samstag International Visual Arts Scholarships are unique in Australia: a small crop of artists is annually given the means to study overseas. Any artist who has successfully completed study within the last five years at an Australian art institution is eligible to submit an application - showing relevant recent work, a description of the courses they would seek to attend and an account of that course's prospects for their own further development.

This would seem to favour artists with the five years' experience over the graduate of last week, and to favour still more the post-graduate, though it does not always do so. The extra maturity and the more extensive body of work do mean that the artists are rarely fledglings. They have work to show, have already spent considerable time developing their ideas and practices - in the 'real world', outside institutions and the timetabled continuum that institutions reinforce.

The 'pre-Op' training gives them grounds for confidence and the impetus of a direction to their work. Arriving thus, they are the more able to forge connections with overseas galleries, curators and with other like-minded artists. It is more difficult to approach galleries or gain others' notice with nothing to show.

Samstag is unintendedly also a kind of Australian cultural diplomacy. The presentation of Australian art overseas is not the Samstag system's purpose but must be regarded as a useful side-effect: talented and interesting younger Australian artists turn up, courtesy of the Samstag munificence, at important art schools overseas with some regularity and naturally communicate something of Australian ideas and perspective when they do so.

The Samstag alumni are also an interesting sample of new Australian art's preoccupations and modes at any one time. Again, this is not its purpose - it is not a survey, instructed to represent and reflect concerns, activities, modes - but in aggregate it might constitute a very telling selection. And, to the degree that it focuses on originality and promise (not representativeness), it will likely be found to have been quite prescient. In the long run, history - art history, too - is a history of winners: if these are successful artists they will shape that history more than the merely typical.

Three of the artists present videos that mark out something of a spectrum of video types: Julie Henderson's focus is on simple repetitions, repertoires that constitute poetic metaphors for, or analogues of, psychic states - the camera typically focusing on just a gesture or move, not even including the whole body of the performer. Guy Benfield's works involve, and to a degree 'feature', elaborate sets and decor. Benfield shows what might be thought ironised demonstrations of artistic endeavour. TV Moore's videos relate less than the others to canonical performance practice and resemble video clips or short, emotional movies. These are large scale multi-channelled videos for purpose-built installation settings, working repetition of single narrative moments or tropes and employing musical soundtrack.

**TV Moore's** *Dead Zone* videos, which the viewer sees, one on his or her left, the other on the right, show a figure running, staggering through a city. Empty streets presumably shot in the early morning. The figure is barefooted and stumbles repeatedly, always nearly losing balance, and turns regularly to look over his shoulder at his (implied) pursuer. One video follows his progress, effectively constituting the pursuing point of view. The other would have been filmed retreating before the staggering runner, but is projected in reverse, so that the figure retreats and the oddness of his gait gains a vulnerable, awkward grace and the viewer gains a great intimacy with it, noting characteristic strengths and flexibility, the slightness of the figure and the dance-like quality of the movements.

Moore's *Neddy* series (which deal with aspects of the Ned Kelly myth) allow the viewer greater distance: but they are extraordinarily affecting distillations of aspects of the story and its resonance: bravura, foolhardiness, iconicity, idealized recklessness in the case of *The Wild Colonial Boy* and, in *Burn Out*, beautiful elegy. Both are shot such that one half of the screen is mirrored on the other half - like a Rorschach blot: so half a standing, prancing Kelly figure doubles into one fully, but oddly moving, two-legged figure at centre screen. A small horse and rider (rider on hobby horse) rides out in the background balanced exactly by its mirror-imaged counterpart moving in the other direction. Kelly appears to be doing karaoke (or hairbrush singing, using a torch for a mike): which seems an equivalent for our identification with the lawless hero and Ned's possible sense of audience.

*Burn-Out* really does consist of watching the campfire (two, because they're mirrored, duplicated) burn down. The symmetries (of fires, curling smoke and arched trees) are very beautiful. Kelly is evoked through the briefest appearance of the two horsemen cantering/cavorting just once between the trees: either members of his gang or the searching police party. They suggest innocence and futility, even the innocence and futility of the police: Australia as site of infinite, farcical repetition.

**Guy Benfield's** videos enact perversely didactic demonstrations of counter-intuitive actions, that can read as metaphors or allegories for romantic conceptions of art-making. They use stylized 60s/70s period-style sets and mise en scene. The conceptions of art they deal with seem those of that period's avant-garde and in their extremism and single-mindedness can still seem sacrosanct. Part of the work's operation is to shrink, miniaturize, condense the tradition as it re-animates it: a work of summation and summary. A 'wrong-end-of-the-telescope' effect is brought about partly through the use of sets and video: these are performances captured, already in a past - facts beyond our reach, which we can witness but no longer affect. Of course the case is as much the opposite: the video is the art, includes within it these distancing effects for our judgement, these being part of the video's meaning not part of its ontological status. But Benfield's works are uncannily able to have it both ways and to enjoy the tension and instability of the relation.

At least three ineradicable clichés or truisms about art and life are tested: *Universal Love Action* has a couple working together, agonistically climbing the walls of their apartment to do so. So, with much undulant reaching and wrenching, they 'make art' together: from various vantage points they drip paint onto a canvas. Art and passion?

*French Pup / live action* has a long-haired guitarist dip his guitar in paint and smear the walls and flick paint from the guitar's head (also onto a canvas), bang the guitar against the surface: to make art, and much electric feedback. (Guitar solos are art, are 'expression', right?) Each of these videos ends with the work being exhibited to the camera: proof.

*LP Werk (Pais Tropical)* has a record player 'do' the art: a pencil is affixed and set to turning on the record spindle, while a guy holds the piece of paper inefficiently, but effortfully, in place using his toe to hold a piece of wood to which the paper is affixed. Shows finished work.

Their power derives in part from the successful conjuring of the (or a) tradition - and stems from the adequacy and persuasiveness of this re-animation. Benfield thus puts an argument, and attempts to demonstrate it - to fulfil, correctively, normatively, the brief of the form - and to extend it.

In contrast with the scenarios played out in Moore's and Benfield's videos - that is, narratives, demonstrations/tasks performed, and telling, near-climactic moments of implied narrative - **Julie Henderson's** pieces tend to the fragmentary. In them action is repeated, the time might often be 'real time' - that is, not telescoped or compressed - but it might also be suspended, timeless, moments 'out of time'. Henderson's video performances treat areas of experience and cognition that are liminary or which shift undecidably between the subliminal and the conscious. The effect can be a resemblance to an image caught from a waking dream, an image which is tied firmly to a mood and is recognizable as having been subject to unconscious attention and interrogation. The time of such pieces is that of prolonged attention, not that of recounting or syllogism.

Henderson's works all deal with, and deal in, corporeal movement and notions of speed or pace. One class of these is made up of responses to a site or, as with the collaborations with Scottish artist Kevin Henderson, responses to another's work. In these pieces the operation is more interpretative and the videos themselves focus less on a single image, are less fragmentary: they feature the performer's body whole, framed in time and space. Again, they give analogues of states of displacement - or they seek to show such dislocation bridged, annulled.

Simone Slee and Louisa Bufardeci are at the stage of shifting up a gear and employing a number of media: Bufardeci moving from two-dimensional wall pieces - to hoardings and interactive video animations, and Simone Slee from installation and the sculptural to performance-and-event, and billboard hoardings.

**Simone Slee's** preceding work derived from the deployment of the body (her own) vis-a-vis space(s), time and objects. A performance orientation. Her major project since has been the *Onsequence* of works. These develop from her background in design offices: a range of white-vinyl sculptural objects that are sculptures which combine to make installations and scenarios (for gallery, photo, poster, billboard). The objects (futuristic, clunkily reminiscent of hospital technology and science fiction) are, through their extensions, connectable. They blend the functional and non functional, confounding the usual knowledge we have of objects. They are neither rational nor systematic but expressive of the presence of the body and of people's psychological connections. They signal and induce interdependence, trust, dependence, care: mattresses with plug-in tubes, vests that connect, one to another - for sustenance, transfusion, feeding, help.

Best known are the images of Slee's suits that reveal the vulnerable stomach. This is an interesting step from gallery art into 'the social', to enliven, activate, social norms and links. They inaugurate a form of 'play', with its abstraction of society and society's reciprocity and conventions of trust and recognition and its innocence. The body suits also perform a levelling of the players (bracketing out their wider social role).

**Louisa Bufardeci's** works seem initially, for a moment, like large paintings. But they are not. Bufardeci makes mostly digital prints (in effect maps and charts) that utilize various systems and investigate the colour-coding of visual information, statistical information. The results are not subjectively derived, and not through usual symbolic convention. They have a bracing and arbitrary linkage -to social analysis, political economy.

These are not emotional and culturally embedded understandings of colour and form that underlie these 'pictures'. This recognition is something of a shock and a challenge - a move away from colour as emotional index, and it relates more to a culture of technology, and analysis.

Initially we try to see them as conventional abstraction: the mistake and readjustment are part of our education, a heuristic device. The heavy lode of information gives these pictures' coding an intensely powerful effect. Witness *Export Distribution* - full of diagrammatic urgency, part way between electric circuitry, the viral and patterns of force and movement. These are wall-sized digital prints and, meanwhile, Bufardeci plans to move to animation with interactive components.

**Tim Sterling's** work - intricately, meticulously, obsessively constructed - covers quite a spectrum: signification that ranges from the hot overload of *Bomb* to the 'cool' of the large transparent grid shown at Roslyn Oxley and at the EAF this year in the solo show, *Trajectory*. All invite the dual application of the viewer's wonder and curiosity in tandem with an investigative, constructive imaginative engagement.

In *Trajectory*, Sterling disposed a group of his pieces - to make more evident than hitherto their other, less formalist and more fictive function. These played on two spatial and architectural themes. One concerned office space and workaday utilitarian furniture and fittings: wastepaper bin, air-conditioning vent, filing cabinet. The other posited the childhood space - and thereby the childhood 'time' - of playground and toys: a grid of bars to climb in and through. It would seem that they meant to overlay upon each other the one's supposed *innocence* (freedom, reverie and play) and the other's work-bound *constraint and system*. Which would make for a troubled, worrisome childhood - or a more mysteriously impish and feckless adult world. Or the suggestion of a continuum? The formal intricacy of the pieces' construction served to divert us into the deeply but idly wondering gaze of a reflection that was both adult and childlike.

*Bomb* presented a kind of rebus - complete with surrogate viewer: the puzzling birds, two of them, that play at unravelling the piece's unspooling cassette-tape ribbon, mimic an involvement that stands for ours and serves to induce it. The large cube (*Not yet titled: 1*) functions - as did Sol LeWitt's gridded sculptural permutations - to have our rational conception explain and inform our sensory inventory of the object and its identification or certification as grid, cube or whatever. (We see it when we believe it.)

Sterling's pieces, though, through their fragility and transparency, require constant re-verification: gleams and reflections, temporary invisibilities or transparency, render them permanently unstable, evanescent. Around and through this impasse and engagement, a wider cloud of thought and feeling bleeds in.

\* \* \*

**Ken Bolton** is a poet who writes often on the visual arts. His most recent publications are *Untimely Meditations* (Wakefield Press, 1997) and, as editor, *Homage To John Forbes* (Brandl & Schlesinger, 2002). Ken Bolton works at the Experimental Art Foundation in Adelaide.