

2007 Samstag essay

Loose connections

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The benefit of foreign travel for artists was officially recognised in France in 1663 with the inauguration of the Prix de Rome, the forerunner of the Samstag and all other distinguished travelling scholarships. The recipients (unlike Samstag Scholars, who travel much more widely) all went to the same city and set up studios in the same place, the French Academy in Rome. The works they produced became so similar that it was difficult to tell them apart, and by the 1860s complaints were being made about their lack of originality. Their journey was made in pursuit of the one true source. Athens might have been a more logical destination, but ongoing struggles with the Turkish Empire meant that Greece was out of the question, besides which it seemed a little too foreign. Until the late 19th century there was a limit to how much European artists were expected to broaden their horizons.

A century and a half of change has thrown the world of art off its Rome-Paris axis. Samstag Scholars go to many other academies in many other cities and produce work of great diversity. They grew up in an era when international travel became relatively cheap. Any cultural experiences that cannot be made accessible at first hand via a jumbo jet are today available in electronic form, usually on the Internet. Much has been made of the disintegrating sense of location caused by all this. Politically and economically the centres, while shifting, still manage to hold; but visual information comes from everywhere.

The universal availability of images, thanks to the camera and electronic dissemination, is an idea that was very striking to artists a generation ago. The assortment of images from the past and the present that bubbled up in the mass-media soup made a great impact on international art. Instantaneous information, however, was accepted remarkably quickly as a fact of life, and the technology providing it has advanced further. The rather clunky videotape recordings were replaced by digital video disks (DVDs) and vision (which we used to call 'footage' in the days when it was stored on lengths of tape or film) can be sent anywhere in no time through high-speed broadband. The all-pervading influence of the electronic media no longer preoccupies artists. Like the citizens of a besieged city, most artists (and other people) have learned to live with the bombardment. It seems normal. It will follow them wherever they go.

This year's Samstag Scholars all live and/or work with it in different ways, but it isn't the subject of their art, as it was in the case of so many artists a couple of decades ago. Anthea Behm and Sarah CrowEST have assimilated the electronic media to the extent that they produce short movies on DVD. Kirra Jamison evokes mythical culture with an intimacy that is better suited to paintings (which is what she makes) than to movies. Jess MacNeil makes both. Photographer Paul Knight makes pictures that often resemble film stills. Sculptor Nick Mangan works with unexpected conjunctions of things that refer to a global dissemination of culture that predates the camera by thousands of years.

As it is now possible to make a movie on your mobile phone, filmmaking has become as natural to many artists as talking. For [Anthea Behm](#) it seems to have become as natural as dreaming. Her work *The Chrissy Diaries* catalogues the female archetypes that girls dream of becoming when they grow up, but Behm portrays them with poignant disillusionment. The short film clips of Chrissy (played by Behm) fulfilling her fantasies don't quite match the glamorous images a little girl might imagine.

A contestant in a beauty pageant is represented as the modern day princess. Just like a princess in a fairy story, the lucky winner wanders tentatively through a dark wood, but instead of bearing the title bestowed upon her, the sash Chrissy wears is emblazoned with her phone number. As a bikini model she does her job as alluringly as possible and smiles bravely despite the sun in her eyes. Neither on a beach nor beside a hotel pool, Chrissy is in an anonymous waterhole, which can only be recognised as being beside the sea when an occasional wave breaks orgasmically over the horizon. The cheerleader's solitary routine is performed in rather awkward silence at night on a deserted playing field. The only sound is the rustle of pompoms. Without the supporting context of other cheerleaders and the roar of a crowd, all the choreographed exuberance seems a bit silly and sad. Incongruous elements infiltrate the *The Chrissy Diaries*. As happens in dreams, there's always something wrong with the picture.

[Sarah CrowEST's](#) video works could be seen as a series of warped portraits of an artist. The speeded-up vignettes of CrowEST doing funny things in funny outfits, while irresistibly endearing, provide a harsh parody of an artist at work, desperate to succeed. She performs most of these sketches as a character she refers to as Bobblehead, who has a large spherical head with big dots for the eyes and mouth. She looks like an innocent, perpetually surprised monster. Equipped with mallet, chisel and a long evening dress, she carves facsimiles of her bloblike head from a block of plaster. The balloon-headed figure mutilates herself, like Itchy and Scratchy, the stars of a cartoon show within a cartoon show, who delight Bart and Lisa Simpson by ripping each other apart. Bobblehead sticks a pin into the cuddly rounded forms of her misshapen cartoon anatomy until all the pastel-coloured body fluids have spilled out. The videos' accompanying vocal sounds, alternately slowed to guttural groans and speeded up to squeaky giggles, could serve as the sound track to either a horror movie or an episode of the Chipmunks.

Bobblehead has an alter ego, the sensibly bewigged and bespectacled Winifred, who embodies the earnestness of experimental art as she conducts her practice dressed in a white lab coat. She is impeccably organised while Bobblehead is impetuously messy. Together they span a range of references culled from TV and magazines: the cult of celebrity, the style of contemporary Japanese manga, scientific experiments, beauty product promotions, cooking

demonstrations and extreme makeovers. CrowEST uses visual languages that are now instantly familiar to explain something more obscure: what it feels like to be an artist.

Painting becomes a more intriguing phenomenon as alternatives to it proliferate. The question 'Why painting?' is an increasingly forceful one. In the work of [Kirra Jamison](#) the appeal of the medium is made very obvious by the way she uses it.

The physical reality of the painted surface is strongly emphasised by the loose, dripping brushwork. This is in distinct contrast to photographic techniques that allow viewers to overlook the process of representation and imagine that the content itself is real. Jamison's blending of human and animal in her work creates mythical creatures. Her paintings are lyrical and mysterious, often omitting facial features and other details, allowing passages of paint to perform their traditional magic by taking form in the viewer's imagination. She exploits the ability of the decorative in art to liberate the imagination of both artist and viewer in ways that are not possible in precise depictions. The animal/ human hybrids introduce shamanistic elements, and seem to offer primitivism as an antidote to the sense of detachment that comes with experiencing the world second-hand through the mass-media. These hybrids address the contemporary condition directly, and the artist describes them as reflecting the way life in the twenty-first century unfolds against a background of image-overload. Far from turning her back on the elaborate interconnectedness created by the digital revolution, Jamison actually illustrates the model that Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari have proposed for it: the rhizome.

[Paul Knight](#) takes direct and uninflected pictures of ordinary people. They are shown doing the things ordinary people do, but ordinary photographers don't photograph; the literal and emotional nakedness of his camera subjects is remarkably frank. Knight has gone to great lengths to avoid the kind of mundane blandness or gritty exposé that often characterises social realist photography. His photographs of people are intensely intimate and strangely ambiguous. The viewer cannot know for certain whether these are scenes of love or despair, ecstasy or anger. The cumulative effect, however, is distinctly bleak, and creates an impression that Knight is stripping away some of the niceties of conventional appearance that give society its comfortable insulation. The practice of veiling the truth in popular culture is alluded to in his photographs of the curtains used in cinemas to maintain illusion by masking the reality of the screen.

Knight presents scenes of slightly skewed ordinariness with unfiltered brightness and clarity that eliminate the possibility of evocative atmosphere. The images are confronting and uncompromising, but instead of harshness, their realism creates an unexpectedly poetic tenderness.

As in the paintings of Lucian Freud, the voluptuousness and vulnerability of flesh becomes a subject in its own right. The situations that Knight depicts are often emotionally charged, yet give no sense of theatricality. Viewers get the strange feeling (much vaunted in documentary film and photography) of actually being there, but with Knight's photographs, we're not sure we should be. His work reverses the numbing effect caused by the mass-media, which has made us accustomed to seeing too much.

The strangeness in [Jess MacNeil's](#) videos of the Sydney Opera House can be more directly explained. Digital manipulation has removed the people but left their shadows. Surprisingly, the result is something that could be described as visual music. Possibly this is because the parallel lines of the steps suggest the staves of a musical score, on which the dark fragmented shapes ascend and descend like the notes on a scale. Their rippling movement is in itself musical, like a piano trill. Just as Vivaldi's *Four Seasons* evoke specific times of the year, MacNeil's videos represent particular times of day, and even specific months. The two videos of bright daylight and busy activity on the steps were filmed in March and December, and are titled accordingly. They contrast dramatically with the twilight serenity of boats on a still stretch of the Ganges River in *The Shape of Between*. The slightly slowed motion of the boats is cyclical, eventually returning them to the point where they began.

The title of that slow and lyrical passage gives some indication of MacNeil's approach to filmmaking, and emphasises that her intentions are more abstract than narrative. While the flickering shadows animate the otherwise static grid of the steps, the gradually changing configuration of the drifting boats articulates the fluid surface tension that keeps them afloat. Both backgrounds, the hard regular steps and the formless expanse of the water fill the frame completely. Movement also pervades every part, like a non-figurative colour-field canvas with a composition that is literally dynamic. It seems quite logical that MacNeil is also a painter.

[Nick Mangan](#) is a sculptor who animates three-dimensional space with the same gradual pervasiveness with which MacNeil animates two dimensions. His structures are essentially accretions, sometimes geological, like crystals; sometimes organic, like coral. They also incorporate unexpected combinations of objects, and reflect the collage principle that has continually influenced art since Picasso began sticking bits of bric-a-brac together a century ago. Mangan expresses an interest in the proliferation of exotic souvenirs associated with trade routes and colonialism. The meaning and use of such objects transforms as their location alters, and they become recontextualized in a global system of information and commodity exchange. This is not new. The pearl shells readily available for thousands of years as Aboriginal currency on the west coast of Australia became ritual objects by the time trading networks had brought them to the central desert.

This phenomenon has now expanded immeasurably and become more complex. We live in a collage society pieced together from fragments so diverse that their origins are almost meaningless. Geographical and cultural divisions have dissolved to the point where everything is more or less loosely connected. Mangan's sculptures exemplify this. It is not, however, the connections that seem most significant (although his conjunctions of things, such as a photocopier with

stalactites or a metal ladder with a termite colony, are striking). He expresses the accompanying dissolution. Termites provide a very useful analogy for this dual process because they not only invade and destroy objects, but also rearrange and construct matter. Mangan's sculpture *The Colony* suggests both growth and decay. The spiky construction of chewed wood could be alternatively read as skeletal remains or a thrusting edifice.

Like all this year's Samstag Scholars, he remains ambivalent about the effects of our densely cross-linked civilization, but makes them fundamental to his work.

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