

OCTOPUS

Stephen Bram

Bronwyn Clark-Coolee

Melinda Harper

Gail Hastings

Anne Marie May

Rose Nolan

Kerrie Poliness

Gary Wilson

15 October - 7 November 1992

The Identity of Art

Carolyn Barnes

The space of contemporary culture is one in which disparate representational orders compete to establish authority. Canonical artistic forms - painting, sculpture, drawing - stand as signifying practices within the circumscribed boundaries of 'the aesthetic'. Yet they simultaneously exist in a far broader field of cultural signification - the media, mass production, mass reproduction. In their own way each of the artists in this exhibition necessarily steers a path between these various poles of emission, whilst developing the critical legacy of radical modernist abstractions. Their work is like but unlike its sources: in as much as they uphold the integrity of the non-objective, spurning an art practice grounded in narrative and the self, they open it up by making reference to wider social factors, highlighting the ambivalence of cultural determinations.

While the production of cultural meaning is most likely the result of discontinuous, and ultimately irresolvable forces and standpoints, the semblance of fixed value in the matter of culture is nevertheless produced on an everyday basis, ensuing largely from contextual specificities, the effects of discursive framing, the perception of difference across the high/low cultural divide. The contents of the museums and galleries gain identity through a certain variance from more general economies of production. One is artisanal, the Other technological. One is the said repository of elevated themes and concerns, the Other the imagined site of capital. One has for centuries traded in the unique and unitary, the Other dedicated itself to proliferation and seriality.

In the work of the eight artists in this exhibition, Stephen Bram, Bronwyn Clark-Cooler, Melinda Harper, Gail Hastings, Anne Marie May, Rose Nolan, Kerrie Poliness and Gary Wilson, there is an evident merging of the two forces, problematizing the general separation of the artistic from the wider sphere of the social. The form of the works (as painting, as sculpture) while art-like is nevertheless frequently reminiscent of some other thing in the world. The generative procedures employed may

be of the manual order of 'art' yet equally replicate something of the logic of mass production. A common seriality serves to undermine the fiction of the unique cultural artefact. Many of the materials used are not conventionally artistic in character. They are by contrast the common materials of now, the excesses of capitalist production making them cheap and readily available.

The presence of these qualities, however, is no sign of a naive belief in the possibility of obliterating the functional divisions between art and the Kantian life-world, a central preoccupation of twentieth century avant-gardes often demonstrating an uncritical acceptance of the worldly sphere. The interruption of the seamless realm of aesthetics becomes an axis for reflecting upon art's historically unique form, testing its power in as much as it wonders at its operation. Here are a group of works which demonstrate many of the characteristics of serious abstraction. If their material poetry and formal clarity are no deception, a simultaneous dedication to technical simplicity and low-technology processes serves to invalidate simplistic assumptions about the heroic nature of art in the social imagination, an interest which has as its subtext a democratization of artistic production.

In every instance the limitation of means and conceptual intent are indivisible: they are one and the same thing. If Stephen Bram's paintings suggest formal complexity and painstaking attention to detail, the mode of production has been specifically designed to create maximum effect through an economy of means. If Kerrie Poliness's paintings infer formal rigor, they are as much the result of chance eruptions within a systematized pattern of production. If Gary Wilson's iconic abstractions attain a real sense of the monumental, they represent an alliance of the most rudimentary elements.

Wilson's paintings are an extreme example of the investigation of artistic function. Every aspect of their being is conditionally informed by some

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opposing factor. The largeness of scale contrasts to the thinness of the support for painting. The restricted means confronts the grandiosity of formal conception. The aesthetic purity of the abstract is mediated by the mundane specificity of the chosen materials (house paint on plastic). At every level the auratic authority of art meets the ground plane of the everyday, minus the assurance of an evident hierarchical ranking.

While reflection upon the nature and purpose of art constitutes a primary concern of the work as a whole, the repeated references to mass production become a means of scrutinizing the often unacknowledged relationship between cultural modernism and the ideology of modernization. Abstraction and industrial production belong in more than an arbitrary sense to the same historical moment. Scientific and technological 'progress' were an important catalyst in driving many artists early this century to reflect in unprecedented ways upon art's historical pertinence, inspiring them to throw over cultural tradition, a process directly precipitating the development of non-objectivity.

The metaphor of the machine and the idea of mass production reach to the core of many manifestations of modernism. The self-reflexivity of modernist cultural practices shares a certain symmetry with the drive towards standardization, the reductivist imperative at the heart of modernist abstraction parallels the ideology of rationalization. In many senses the effects of industrialization and the mentality of cultural modernism lead to the same position - a uniformity of outcomes within a totalizing order.

What is implicit to the conception of cultural modernism becomes explicit in the work of these artists. If small differences make each painting an independent entity, in the work of Bronwyn Clark-Coolee, Anne Marie May, and Kerrie Poliness particular formal configurations and materials (deployed in combination with a set of strict parameters for production) become a mechanism for generating a string of works: the

ethos of the studio extends to embrace the reality of the production line.

At the same time that striving for perfection of form and surface, for identity, which is the sign of the mass produced object is largely absent from the majority of works. Many an edge is smudged or wobbly, the integrity of patterns disrupted, surfaces sabotaged with irregularities. If this lends a more human texture to the general idea of production, suggesting the possibility of individual activity within its transcendent order, revealing the potential for the creation of a strange and compulsive beauty out of almost nothing, conventional ideas of art hardly remain intact as a result. Art is neither represented as wholly good, other regimes of production wholly bad, challenging the viewer to work through a body of highly determined practices and discourses to unravel relative meaning.

This principle becomes the collective crux of the work, marking the complexity of each artist's project. In every instance difference within sameness becomes a pivotal issue. While the work of Anne Marie May and Gail Hastings demonstrates a clear debt to minimalism, a certain break with the minimalist canon emanates from an underlying shift in intentionality. In Anne Marie May's work the serial logic and industrial aesthetic of the minimalist object is retained yet disrupted by an interest in immediacy and the use of low-technology modes of manufacture. It is no accident that minimalist sculpture was produced by salaried workers in engineering workshops while May's hybrid picture-objects are made by her with a sewing machine. In the work of Gail Hastings minimalist rationalism confronts and is confronted by a concern for feeling (felt) and sensibility. The minimalist paradigm of self-reflexive, unitary objects (so designed to attest to the universality of perceptual experience) is made to recognize both the experience of language and more indeterminate psychological forces, questioning the privileging of visuality in the reception of works of art.

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The conceptual distinctions involved in the work of Stephen Bram and Bronwyn Clark-Coolee are perhaps even more precariously balanced. Both demonstrate a concern for the role of transcendent cultural constructs. Both endlessly replicate the object of their investigations, accepting the risk of reinforcing its extant authority. Clark-Coolee deploys simple shapes derived from corporate symbolism, their repetition as pattern mimicking the process whereby ubiquity leads to familiarity, familiarity to normalization. For Stephen Bram the instrumentality of geometry as an epistemological 'given' is an ingrained reality, its consequent truth-value almost beyond question. If his paintings recognise geometry's status as the universal structuring principle of the built world, the inherent indeterminacy of these 'architectural' spaces suggests that while geometry has for centuries represented the exercise of Reason, its immanent pragmatism may also hold the seeds of untruth.

Inherent to the work in this exhibition is an implicit critique of the cultural parameters of High Modernism; its disdain for the world, its prohibition on commentary, its presumption in establishing the precepts of the few as a set of universal laws. In the paintings of Kerrie Poliness, Rose Nolan and Melinda Harper late modernism's central orthodoxies (the integrity of the aesthetic, originality, authorship, pure presence) are undermined by the reflexive linkage of repetition and formal invention, process and intentionality. Their work redefines the modernist sublime, recalling in particular marginalised aesthetic traditions, invoking hard-line avant-gardist mechanisms of transgression and negation only to suspend them.

While Poliness's work proceeds from an absolute refusal of an illusory mastery, she takes an obsessive interest in its hand-made quality. For Harper the energies released from the rejection of traditional criteria of artistic worth are contained by the deliberate self-limiting dimension of her practice. While she revels in the material

consistency and infinite colours of oil paint, her deployment of oils as a medium makes the process of production extended in the extreme, rearranging ideas of transcendence around more likely possibilities, more probable forms of idealism. Nolan's work revolves around the perpetual exchange of oil paint for junk, the heightened iconography of the cross for the commonplace materiality of cardboard, the promise of limitless creativity for the actual repetition of a few basic elements, forever imbedding the material and symbolic parameters of production in the work's final form.

The concerns of this body of work are hardly monolithic yet occupy a certain collective ground, representing a set of acts and practices which whilst accepting the determinants of aesthetic convention nevertheless acknowledge the wider referents which serve to define cultural significance. The work suggests that cultural value perhaps only exists in the gaps between what we choose to construct as solid cultural markers. If some of these reference points reside comfortably in the field of museum culture, in the established realm of objects d'art, in the central discourses of cultural modernism, others are anchored in material and procedural relations particular to the widest sphere of the social in the present. Through their work these artists present a model of critical action which varies from orthodox patterns of negation and rupture, suggesting that cultural meaning, despite appearances, is a matter of perpetual negotiation from both within and without.

September 1992

Carolyn Barnes is a lecturer in History and Theory of Art and Design at Swinburne University of Technology, Melbourne, and has written extensively on contemporary Australian Art.

Stephen Bram

1. *Untitled*, 1988
oil on canvas, 35 x 50 cm
2. *Untitled*, 1990
oil on canvas, 35 x 50 cm
3. *Untitled*, 1989
oil on canvas, 35 x 50 cm
4. *Untitled*, 1991/92
oil on canvas, 35 x 50 cm

Courtesy of City Gallery, Melbourne

Bronwyn Clark-Coolee

Untitled, 1989-1992
acrylic on canvas,
variable dimensions

Courtesy of the artist

Melinda Harper

1. *Untitled*, 1991
oil on masonite, 35 x 44 cm
2. *Untitled*, 1991
oil on masonite, 38 x 51 cm
3. *Untitled*, 1991
oil on masonite, 39 x 55 cm
4. *Untitled*, 1991
oil on masonite, 35 x 44 cm
5. *Untitled*, 1991
oil on masonite, 38 x 54 cm
6. *Untitled*, 1991
oil on masonite, 42 x 59 cm
7. *Untitled*, 1991
oil on masonite, 35 x 44 cm
8. *Untitled*, 1991
oil on masonite, 38 x 53 cm

Courtesy of City Gallery, Melbourne

Gail Hastings

feeling felt = a touch too much, 1992
wood, felt, paper, water colour,
dimensions variable

Courtesy of the artist

Anne Marie May

Twenty untitled panels, 1992
felt on wooden stretchers, 30 x 30 cm
overall dimensions variable

Courtesy of the artist

Rose Nolan

Sort of Sensitive with Standards #1 to 15, 1992
cardboard cut-outs with mixed media,
dimensions variable

Courtesy Tolarno Galleries, Melbourne

Kerrie Poliness

Untitled paintings, 1991
oil on masonite, 16 panels 22.5 x 26.5 cm,
overall dimensions variable

Courtesy of Tolarno Galleries, Melbourne

Gary Wilson

1. *a second coming of the future/Brown circle*, 1990
enamel paint on plastic, 200 x 270 cm
2. *a second coming of the future/Brown cross*, 1991
enamel on plastic,
200 x 270 cm

Courtesy of the artist

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