

from the

ephemeral

to the

eternal

The recent work of
Eugene Carchesio
Helen Fuller
Madonna Staunton

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16 September – 23 October 2004

University of South Australia Art Museum

Assembled and seen in relation to one another, bodies of work by Eugene Carchesio, Helen Fuller and Madonna Staunton provide a unique insight into the contemporary world. Transcending the banality and triviality of daily life, the work of these three artists embraces territory that posits art more as language and idea than as visual form. Going beyond their obvious materiality (even Carchesio's suites of understated watercolours possess a strong physicality), their work has a presence and aura that evokes a multiplicity of associations and meanings. Working with humble, everyday materials and employing practices that are simple and direct, each artist has created a distinctive oeuvre where personal reference plays a vital part.

Charting the elusive space between **the ephemeral and the eternal** their art challenges the viewer to share in highly subjective and profound experiences.

There is a disquieting ambiguity and mystery about their work, deriving, in part, from each artist's use of a rigorous abstract language and also from intimation at a deeper significance implicit in the compositions. The disparate elements employed in the three bodies of work — watercolour, matchboxes, paper, recycled wood, frayed rags and the like — possess impermanence and temporality. A mood of timelessness and otherworldliness prevails. Yet their work has an incisive and critical edge, which places it at the dynamic core of contemporary Australian art practice.

For Helen Fuller, the ephemerality of time is a central and cogent element in her art. Working closely with materials often redolent of an earlier period, she painstakingly fashions assorted handcrafted objects (women's garments are a recurring motif in recent installation work) and combines them with recycled bits and pieces to evoke a particular ambience or narrative. The past, explored through family history and individual experiences, remains the focus of her work. Adopting a strongly analytical approach, Fuller asserts the significance of the associative qualities of objects and materials, which offer clues to her own sense of place and being in the world.

Much of Fuller's art of the past decade has to do with family relationships, particularly with regard to her own parentage. The eccentricities of her father, in particular, who was an avid collector of miscellanea, are articulated in a poignant body of work that simultaneously parodies and celebrates his 'backyard shed life' and suburban domesticity in general. Like the contents of the shed, Fuller's work is a process of layering ideas and materials that evince subtle and diverse meanings. 'Art for art's sake' holds little value for her. Rather, she seeks encouragement in the knowledge that ordinary, everyday objects have the capacity to nourish and sustain the work and to shape her imagination and sense of identity.

Poetic *mélanges* of found objects and materials, Madonna Staunton's assemblages and constructions combine her early interest in collage with a later fascination for the sculptural possibilities of three-dimensional form. Through a rigorous process of selection and placement of the objects and by detaching them from their original associations, she introduces a wider meaning into her art. Clothing, recycled wood, bottles, coat-hangers, piano keys, stencils, fragments of coloured paper and chairs are dominant elements. So, too, is text (she is a skilled wordsmith), the connotations of which take on a deeper significance in her work.

Despite its strong physical quality, Staunton's art invites contemplation; it has the potential to take the viewer beyond its formal structure to the meditative realm of introspection and reflection. Even the powerful large-scale constructions, with their rough-hewn and weathered surfaces, have an unexpected stillness and reverence. There is an ambiguity, a shifting between solidity and intangible depth, which adds to the contemplative quality of the work.

Through her engagement with everyday objects, Staunton deals with the very nature of life and reality. She interprets it in a way that is subtle and private, an approach emanating from within rather than from external forces. In her work,

objects reveal less of their own physical presence and more of the knowledge and feelings of the artist. Their enduring power lies in this paradox, in which the mutability of materials is strengthened and enhanced by the intensity of Staunton's intellect and imagination.

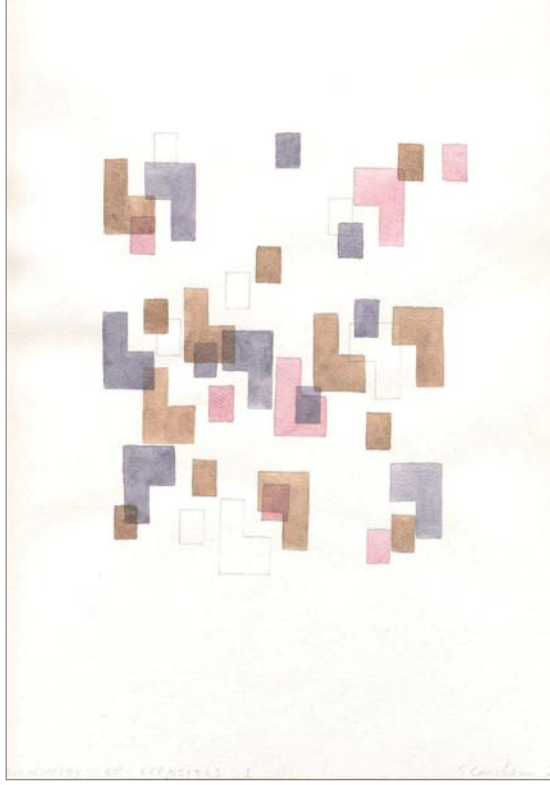
As their titles suggest, Eugene Carchesio's works are enigmatic and wistful. The images are rigorously conceived as abstract arrangements of pictorial elements comprising intricate patterns of colours, shapes and light. Their intimate scale and quiet poetic strength engage the viewer in a gentle dialogue, which is sustained by an aura of stillness and silence. Carchesio is committed to an art that retains a firm basis in nature. Witness, for example, his *Dead leaves of Tokyo* project, begun while completing a residency at the Australia Council's Tokyo studio in 1999. He is also committed to breaking down the dichotomy between art and life (a viewpoint influenced by the *arte povera* movement of the late 1960's) by creating statements that seek interaction with the viewer. The interconnectedness of various realms, both real and imagined, is embodied in recurring motifs such as the cone, circle and hexagon, as well as in symbolic structures like the matchbox and leaf.

For Carchesio, the disparate media of watercolour, assemblage and installation offer ample scope for his continuing exploration of geometric form and concerns associated with a higher, spiritual order. An abiding interest in patterns and shapes, expressed in deceptively simple watercolours and ephemeral installations of paper constructions, has given rise to an extensive body of work in which his quest for unity and universal harmony is realised. Emerging before us like celestial bodies, shapes float weightlessly in a space without limits, creating a sense of lightness and transcendence. White, symbolically the colour of infinity, is ever present in Carchesio's compositions, its purity and restraint lending the work an ethereal quality. In his recent matchbox arrangements, the soft, white surface of the canvas creates an opaque luminosity that imbues the multi-coloured forms with an evocative glow. It is here, perhaps, that the paradox of the ephemeral and the eternal is most keenly challenged.

Stephen Rainbird

Stephen Rainbird has worked as an education officer, curator, senior curator and director in various Australian art museums. He lives in Hobart and works as Senior Curatorial Consultant, QUT Precincts in Brisbane.

Community of opposites 2003
Watercolour and pencil on paper
Two of five sheets, each 30.5 x 23
Courtesy of the artist and bellas milani gallery, Brisbane



A self-taught artist of Italian descent, **Eugene Carchesio** was born in Brisbane in 1960. He studied architecture before

embarking on a career as an artist and musician. Carchesio's corresponding interest in sound and image pervades much of his work. His watercolours, installations, performance and sound art attract a discerning following. A quiet, self-effacing figure, Carchesio came to prominence in the early 1980's as one of a small number of well-informed and talented young practitioners to emerge from Brisbane's independent and artist-run spaces. Through the support of Bellas Gallery (now bellas milani gallery), where he has exhibited regularly since 1987, Carchesio's work has received national and international recognition. He was represented in *Australian Perspecta 1989*, the *Fourth Australian Sculpture Triennial* in 1990 and the *Ninth Biennale of Sydney* in 1992. The artist completed a three-month residency at the Australia Council's Tokyo studio in 1999. In 2001, he was selected to represent Australia at the *Tenth Indian Triennial of Art* in New Delhi and in the following year his work was included in the *Fourth Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art* in Brisbane. In 2002, Carchesio's work was the subject of a survey exhibition at the University of Queensland, where he was artist-in-residence. He has exhibited in Auckland, Berlin, New York, Seoul and Wellington.

Carchesio's practice embraces a rigorous intellectual approach and stringent technical means. He has long been interested in the connections between geometry and art, expressed in intricate patterns and structures that have symbolic and poetic strength. Exploiting a visual language that is minimal and precise, Carchesio's imagery has a pervasive transience and timelessness. His work emanates an aura of silence and quietude and invites contemplation.

The ideas and themes Carchesio conveys in his work have been enriched by contemporary theoretical discourse and also by references to earlier artistic sources. The pioneering abstraction of Russian painters Kasimir Malevich and Wassily Kandinsky and the unconventional performance events of German conceptual artist Joseph Beuys have been important touchstones for him. Carchesio's long-distance telephone conversations with Beuys until the latter's death in 1986 have become legendary. The refined and subtle nature of minimal art and *arte povera*'s focus on ordinary, everyday materials are reflected in the purity and unpretentiousness of Carchesio's work.

The recurring motifs of the cone, circle, hexagon and matchbox and, more recently, of dead leaves, have become key components of Carchesio's art, where patterns, structures and muted forces allude to a sublime, arcane world. There is a resonance of universal truth and utopian vision in his work that implies a mystical and spiritual imperative.

Continually seeking to challenge and extend his art practice, Carchesio enjoys collaborating with other artists. He has worked jointly with Gordon Bennett, Jon Cattapan, Victor Meertens, Madonna Staunton and Anne Wallace.

LIST OF WORKS

Cosmic theories 2002

Watercolour and collage on paper
Eleven sheets from a sketch pad
each 17,5 x 24,5
Courtesy of the artist and
bellas milani gallery, Brisbane

Community of opposites 2003

Watercolour and pencil on paper
Five sheets, each 30,5 x 23
Courtesy of the artist and
bellas milani gallery, Brisbane

Mortal kings 2003

Watercolour and collage on paper
Sixteen sheets, each 42 x 29,5
Courtesy of the artist and
bellas milani gallery, Brisbane

Untitled 2004

Twenty-eight matchboxes with
coloured felt on primed canvas
60 x 75
Courtesy of the artist and
bellas milani gallery, Brisbane

Untitled 2004

Wall installation comprising paper
constructions
Dimensions variable
Courtesy of the artist and
bellas milani gallery, Brisbane

Penance (detail) 2004
White cotton industrial rags, slatted timber table and mirror
Dimensions variable
Courtesy of the artist and Watson Place Gallery, Melbourne



Helen Fuller's art practice embraces collage, painting and installation work. Her art focuses primarily on the intrinsic and associative qualities of recycled and handmade objects. She creates vigorously incisive visual statements that allude to issues of family history and individual identity filtered through memory and personal experience.

Fuller was born in Adelaide in 1949. Following tertiary study from 1969 to 1971 and again in 1977–78, the latter under painter–sculptor Tony Bishop, she travelled extensively throughout the 1980's, visiting Europe, the Middle East and Asia. During this period she also lived in Melbourne, Groningen (The Netherlands) and Brisbane, where she lectured in painting at Queensland University of Technology from 1989 to 1991. Returning permanently to Adelaide in 1992, Fuller subsequently completed a Master of Visual Arts at the South Australian School of Art, University of South Australia.

Fuller's early work chiefly comprises collages and boxed assemblages. Employing a multiplicity of materials drawn from the artist's immediate environment, they elucidate personal concerns relating to issues of identity and role expectations in the context of her own unsettled domestic life. The incorporation of text and Fuller's predilection for word-play, frequently presented in serial imagery, are features of her early work.

The series of dramatic compositions produced by Fuller during the mid 1980's derives from discarded crockery and other vestiges of domesticity garnered from second-hand shops. In these watercolours, photographs, collages and wall sculptures, simple domestic objects are given new life through subtle distortions of colour and form, evoking images suggestive of humanoid shapes and primitive mask-like forms.

Painting has always played a vital role in Fuller's art, as shown in the series of abstract compositions produced by the artist in The Netherlands in 1984 and upon her return to Australia. Fragments of paper and the formal possibilities suggested by piles of books were the key inspiration for these works.

Large-scale installations created in Adelaide from the mid 1990's reveal Fuller's continuing interest in found and handcrafted objects as the primary motivation for her work. She enjoys the physical contact of working with materials and discovering the creative opportunities they present for deconstructing the past. The disclosed narratives offer clues to her own sense of place and being.

Fuller has exhibited successfully for over 25 years. A mid-career survey exhibition of her work was held at the Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane in 1991 and her work is represented in numerous Australian public collections. She has completed several artist-in-residencies, the most important of which was through Asialink, undertaken at the Zheijing Art Academy, Hangzhou in China in 1992.

LIST OF WORKS

Penance 2004

White cotton industrial rags, timber slats and mirror
Dimensions variable
Courtesy of the artist and
Watson Place Gallery, Melbourne

Lino 1 2004

Synthetic polymer paint on Chinese paper
Sheet 66 x 66
Courtesy of the artist and
Watson Place Gallery, Melbourne

Lino 2 2004

Synthetic polymer paint on Chinese paper
Sheet 66 x 66
Courtesy of the artist and
Watson Place Gallery, Melbourne

Cushion I 2003

Ink, synthetic polymer paint, buttons and cotton thread on Chinese paper
Sheet 67.5 x 72
Collection of Sir James and
Lady Cruthers, Perth

Cushion II 2004

Ink, synthetic polymer paint, buttons, cotton thread and safety pin on Chinese paper
Sheet 67.5 x 72
Collection of Sir James and
Lady Cruthers, Perth

Cushion III 2004

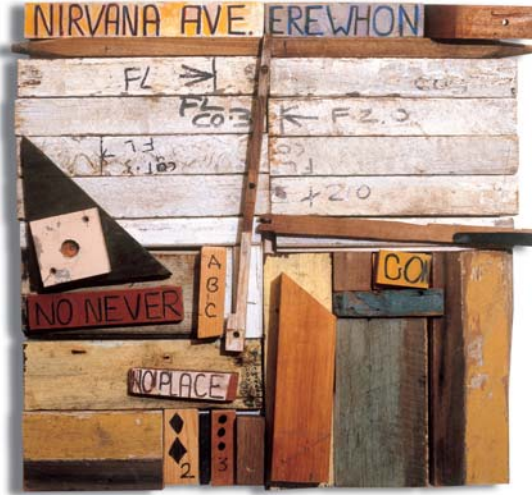
Ink, synthetic polymer paint, buttons, cotton thread and safety pins on Chinese paper
Sheet 67.5 x 72
Courtesy of the artist and
Watson Place Gallery, Melbourne

Cushion IV 2004

Ink, buttons and cotton thread on Chinese paper
Sheet 67.5 x 72
Courtesy of the artist and
Watson Place Gallery, Melbourne

Romantic doubt 1-3 2004

Three assemblages of recycled wood on composition board, each 60 x 60
Courtesy of the artist and bellas milani gallery, Brisbane



A singular and rather modest figure, **Madonna Staunton** is a gifted artist and poet whose achievements span three decades. Her artistic involvement in Brisbane's contemporary cultural life remains one of intense commitment and passion.

Born in the northern New South Wales sugar town of Murwillumbah in 1938, Staunton spent her childhood in Sydney. She moved with her family to Brisbane in 1951. Staunton's interest in art was developed through her mother, who strongly encouraged her creative endeavours.

During the 1960's Staunton became actively involved with Brisbane's Contemporary Art Society. At this time she attended painting classes conducted by Roy Churcher, Bronwyn Thomas (one of her most influential teachers) and Nevil Matthews, as well as life classes with Jon Molvig. Staunton's work from this period comprises large-scale figurative and abstract paintings, the latter influenced by the prevailing American post-painterly abstractionist style. The artist's interest in music, Oriental philosophy and poetry provided inspiration for her approach and persist as enduring concerns for her.

Due to her fragile health, in the mid 1970's Staunton turned to collage. She had begun experimenting with this medium in the late 1960's. Small in scale, abstract and composed of found objects, these deceptively simple works established her reputation as a leading contemporary artist.

Staunton held her first solo exhibition in 1976. Three years later she was included in the *Third Biennale of Sydney: European Dialogue* at the Art Gallery of New South Wales. Reflecting her high profile as an artist throughout the 1980's, Staunton's collages and drawings were frequently included in major surveys of contemporary Australian art. In the late 1980's, she began a series of large-scale wall assemblages using household debris, which marked a turning point in her artistic development. These constructions from wood and other materials became increasingly object-based and sculptural in form and, eventually, freestanding. The early 1990's witnessed a return to painting where cursive script became a feature. Since then this medium, together with assemblage and sculpture, has formed the majority of her output.

The past decade has been a period of personal achievement for Staunton. In 1994, the first full-scale survey exhibition of her work was held at the Queensland Art Gallery. Two years later she was awarded the Medal of the Order of Australia (OAM) by the Federal Government for her services to the visual arts. In 2003, a major solo exhibition of her work was shown at the Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane.

Staunton continues to live and work in Brisbane, where she is regarded as a seminal figure by her contemporaries and also by a younger generation of artists.

LIST OF WORKS

Cipher 1995

Two stencilled cotton vests, cloth, leather and coloured paper on handmade paper
Sheet 101.5 x 80.5 irreg.
Queensland University of Technology
Art Collection, Brisbane

Curtain 1996

Skirt and drawstring bag on painted and stencilled mountboard
Sheet 101 x 81
Courtesy of the artist and bellas milani gallery, Brisbane

Hide 1-2 2002

Two conical constructions of recycled house boards and painter's trestles
Dimensions variable
Courtesy of the artist and bellas milani gallery, Brisbane

Numbers game 2002

Boxed assemblage of metal palette plates and bottles
90 x 90 x 10
Courtesy of the artist and bellas milani gallery, Brisbane

Key 2002

Cabriole chair leg, piano keys and found stencils
86 x 41 x 9
Private collection, Brisbane

Set of four letraset 2002

Letraset pages mounted on book covers
Four panels, each 62 x 49
Courtesy of the artist and bellas milani gallery, Brisbane

Romantic doubt 1-3 2004

Three assemblages of recycled wood on composition board, each 60 x 60
Courtesy of the artist and bellas milani gallery, Brisbane

The red and the black 2004

Railway sleeper covered in bitumen, parts of five painted wooden chairs and four coat-hangers
95 x 214 x 23.5
Courtesy of the artist and bellas milani gallery, Brisbane

Buoyancy 1-2 2004

Two collages of metal, plastic, stamped paper, coloured paper, ink and cardboard on mountboard
Each sheet 80 x 60
Courtesy of the artist and bellas milani gallery, Brisbane



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From the Ephemeral to the Eternal: The recent work of Eugene Carchesio, Helen Fuller and Madonna Staunton catalogue is published to accompany the exhibition of the same title, 16 September – 23 October 2004, at the University of South Australia Art Museum.

Published by the University of South Australia Art Museum
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ISBN 0-8680353-9-4

Designed by fusion.com.au
Printing by Digiwedoo
Proof reading by Stephanie Radok
Exhibition installation by Julian Tremayne and Andrew Best
Edition of 300

Helen Fuller would like to acknowledge the assistance of the Government of South Australia through Arts South Australia.

All measurements are given in centimetres: height x width x depth