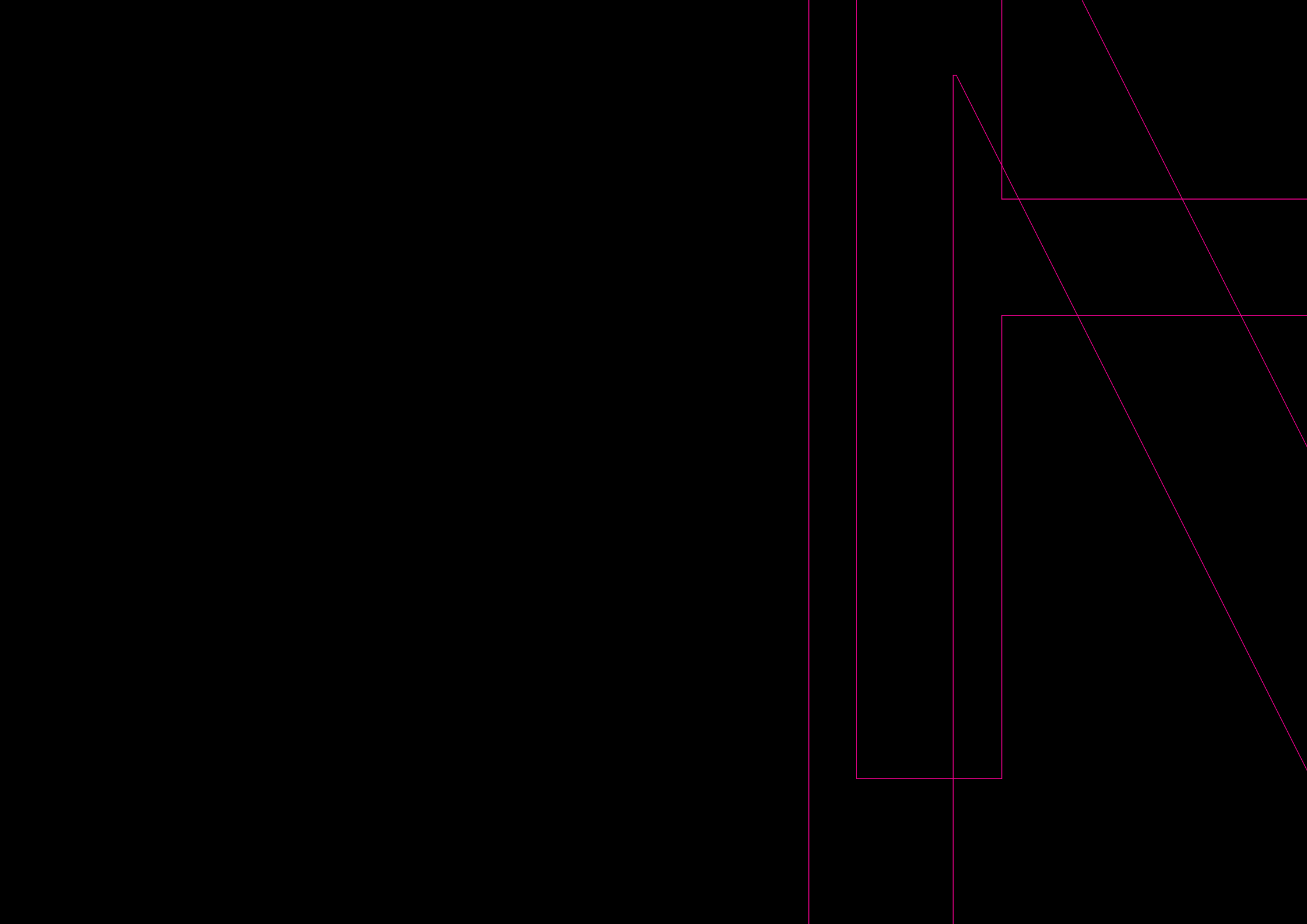
here & now

BREEN
ELDERFIELD
HONEYWILL
MAAS
RYAN
SPARKS

FLINDERS
LANE
GALLERY



The Here and Now exhibition aims to explore the depth of Flinders Lane Gallery's established and developing aesthetic directions with a cross section of six award winning exhibitors exploring a variety of media.

Passionate about our artists' works, the new directorial team at Flinders Lane Gallery is excited to present Here and Now as an overview of recent developments and directions, and a reflection of contemporary Australian art in a broader sense. We are focused on the active support and enthusiastic promotion of contemporary Australian art.

This catalogue contains essays written by highly regarded arts writers on each of the featured exhibitors.

We hope that you find this special exhibition and supporting catalogue engaging and stimulating.

CLAIRE HARRIS, DIRECTOR
PHE RAWNSLEY, ASSISTANT DIRECTOR

Vertigo
bar * venue * gallery * coffee
CAKES

Breen

FOR SOME YEARS IN HIS PAINTINGS WILL BREEN HAS WALKED THE MEAN STREETS OF MELBOURNE'S NORTHERN INNER-CITY. ALL THE SIGNS OF BUILT-UP URBAN LIFE WERE THERE: THE FULLY BOOKED BOOKSTORE, THE TIAMO BISTRO, THE PUBS AND LAUNDRIES; BUT SOMETHING WAS CLEARLY MISSING.

There was something strange about the light as well, the shadows eerily elongated, as though the arch surrealist Giorgio de Chirico had been tinkering with the afternoon sun. The shadows were strangely ominous, creating stark contrasts in colour and light.

But what was truly strange in these streetscapes was the lack of pedestrians. Streets such as these are perpetually populated; there is always a straggler or stroller, shopper or street-worker. In Breen's world the populace has fled, the street folk have abandoned their haunts as the shadows progress. Tiamo's is deserted, the coffee machine stilled. The pubs are locked. The door of the laundromat is ajar, but the washing machines sit silent.

And it is this silence that the paintings exude, as though all breath has been paused. There is no breeze in these paintings, there is no movement whatsoever. There are no cars, there are no rattling trams. It is tempting to envisage these paintings as post-apocalyptic, but that would suggest something cataclysmic and there is no evidence to suggest such a thing. It is as though the world has simply paused, humanity momentarily vanished.

It is not the silence of early morning; the angle of the shadows suggest mid- to late afternoon, a time of day when regardless of usual events, there is always someone sipping coffee at Tiamo's.

Far left
Whatever You Feel Like
2005
Oil on linen
180 x 140 cm
Photograph Jeremy Dillon

Left
Tiamo
2006
Oil on linen
130 x 145 cm
Photograph Jeremy Dillon

Breen is fascinated by the play of shadows, the nether world of light, the potential for mystery and discovery. Breen's world seems rooted in the here and now, but devoid of its creators, as though a sudden evacuation has occurred.

Breen's inner city work has something of the melancholic air of the American artist Edward Hopper's famous 1941 painting *Nighthawks*. Hopper did populate his canvas with rather desolate coffee drinkers, there is a sense of desolation in his painting that hints at aspects of Breen's work. In some ways there are kinships with such other Australian artists as Rick Amor and Howard Arkley. Like Breen, Arkley's world was devoid of humanity in a literal sense, but with his colouration Arkley's world became fantastical. Breen's overall sensibility shares more with Amor. Like that artist Breen is fascinated by the play of shadows, the nether world of light the potential for mystery and discovery. Breen's world seems rooted in the here and now, but devoid of its creators, as though a sudden evacuation has occurred.

And without the cacophony of human activity we see the mundane anew. We are allowed a sudden moment of contemplation amidst what is usually semi-mayhem. We are also granted a moment of recognizance with regard to the transitory nature of contemporary existence. Without the bustling consumer, the bedraggled student, the woman with a pram, we become witness to the strange delicacy of our environs. These paintings do become apocalyptic, for it is not hard to imagine the slow decay, the entropy setting in, the dust silently settling on the world.

Contemplating these airless streets the imagination becomes inflamed. We want to step through the portal and discover what has become of this nether world, this mirror of the immediately recognisable, yet strangely shifted inner-city environs.

A part of the magic here is the sense of nostalgia Breen achieves. Distracted by coffee smells and car fumes we forget to take in the elegant wear and tear of these time-worn vistas, this architecture from previous decades. Perhaps these canvases are populated, but it is a population of ghosts, of those who have walked these streets before us.

In his 2007 show at Flinders Lane Gallery, Faster Pussycat – named after a corner store in one of his paintings – it seemed that Breen had set out not just to capture a sense of the architectural, but to recreate the world around him entirely, street by street, building by building. Like a detective from the somnambulistic side of reality, Breen hunted down every brick and crevice, every shop sign and awning. Arthur's Shoes and Pacific Fast Photo Services were captured and rendered anew. There was an honesty in these canvases that suggested a love for his environment, but simultaneously there was a sense of the analytical, of a painter devoted to finding the magical in the mundane. "I like to turn something ordinary into something extraordinary, something beyond reality," Breen has said of these works. "Create something beautiful from something banal."

This is the plight of the alchemist; to find riches in detritus. What we blithely ignore every day becomes a rich tapestry of historical discovery, an unveiling of a new reality.

Ascribing the term 'beauty' to inner-city suburbia would, as a rule, border on the farcical. But in this envelope of silence we are allowed to glimpse the play of a tree's shadow over the deep green of a coffee shop awning or the dawn-blue of the exterior tiles of an old pub. We are allowed to pause and take in the true colours of everyday life, the colours to which we are blinded by the hustle and bustle of living.

Novelists and filmmakers have often dabbled with the notion of an individual empowered to stop the world. Almost invariably they are voyeurs who make use of their time to undress young women in the street. This could not be further from William Breen's powers. He is a voyeur of the structures and colours of our everyday world. By creating a sense of suspended animation and depopulating his streets we see details of life that have always escaped us. "Although each painting is an intuitive 'moment of clarity', there is also a nostalgic quality, a half remembered past," Breen said of these paintings in 2005. "The scenes are suspended in time and space in an emotive architectural landscape. Bathed in a diffused atmospheric light, the meditative nature of the urban image transcends the banal or familiar, into something sublime."

But there is also a yearning here, an almost desperate desire to slow things down, to allow room for thought. Thus it is not surprising that when Breen escapes the confines of the inner city he heads for the sublime landscapes of the Otway Ranges or the rugged mountains around Apollo Bay. He heads for the old growth forest

Right
First Floor
2005
Oil on linen
165 x 185 cm
Photograph Jeremy Dillon

Left
Tiamo
2006
Oil on linen
130 x 145 cm
Photograph Jeremy Dillon
(detail)

and cool temperate Myrtle Beech forests of Aire Crossing, which is reached – and wait for it – via the Wait a While Road. He travels to such places as Skenes Creek and Hopetoun, embracing the landscape in his painting like a healing succour.

But for those that love such places, who find the sounds and smells of the forest contemplative and restful, there is a melancholy here. Much of the old growth forest around Aire Crossing and its neighbouring environs has been devastated by clear-fell logging, ancient behemoths brought to ground via the teeth of the chainsaw, all too much of it merely for wood-chips. As humanity strangles itself in carbon fumes we continue to cut down the lungs of the earth.

But melancholia and the sublime are often bedfellows. With his subdued palette of blues, greens and greys, with his lowering dark skies and darkened valleys we are transported. As with his 'architectural' works there is an element of the photographic in his framing. Where his inner-city works border on the claustrophobic, his landscapes take in a vista that is almost terrifying in ambition. This is the world of Caspar David Friedrich, the world of the sublime. Looking at these landscapes it is as though William Breen is inviting us to join him in a long, contemplative walk. There is no need for talking; that would disturb the deep, echoing silence. This is a place where the soul can take a moment of respite.

Clearly Breen's paintings resonate with both novice and expert alike. Breen has been selected as a finalist in the Doug Moran Portrait Prize two times. In 2001 he was a finalist in the Brett Whiteley Scholarship, the Redlands Westpac Art Award and the Conrad Jupiter Art Prize. In 2006, Breen was shortlisted for the prestigious Wynne Prize at the Art Gallery of New South Wales. Breen was also a finalist in the Geelong Art Prize 2006 and a finalist in the Fleurieu Peninsula Biennale Art Prize 2006. For an artist seeking meditative pause he has been busy indeed.

In this age of never-quiet mobile phones, beeping computers announcing incoming mail and televisions blaring, it is certainly not hard to be seduced by Breen's moments of quietude. It is all too tempting to stop everything and go and join him on the Wait a While Road. Quietly.

ASHLEY CRAWFORD

This is the world of Caspar David Friedrich, the world of the sublime. Looking at these landscapes it is as though William Breen is inviting us to join him in a long, contemplative walk.

Left
Lavers Hill
2007
Oil on linen
80 x 100 cm
Photograph Jeremy Dillon

Right
Snowy Ridge Track
2008
Oil on linen
80 x 100 cm
Photograph Jeremy Dillon

ELDERFIELD

IT WAS SHEER CHANCE THAT I WAS LISTENING TO THE FIRST MOVEMENT OF PROKOFIEV'S CLASSICAL SYMPHONY ON THE RADIO WHILE PERUSING IMAGES OF DAMIEN ELDERFIELD'S SCULPTURE. TO MY DELIGHT, I REALIZED THERE WERE FASCINATING PARALLELS.

Far left
Rare Earth
2008
Stainless steel, basalt
Photograph Cricket

Left
Reflections
2005
Stainless steel, bluestone
102 x 30 x 35 cm
Photograph Flinders Lane Gallery

In both cases the works were ordered, controlled, yet full of unexpected surprises, they contained intellectual statements softened by underlying humanistic attitudes. And on reflection, I suspected that Prokofiev would have delighted in the sharp-edged clarity of Elderfield's use of stainless steel.

Future art historians (and archaeologists) may identify many of the sculptures produced in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries by the commonly used material – mild steel. David Smith in USA, for instance, Anthony Caro in UK, Ron Robertson Swann in Sydney and Inge King and Lenton Parr in Melbourne have all worked with this material. It is a medium that has enabled sculptors to construct entirely new structures and thus establish a radically new visual vocabulary. Yet, in spite of its many admirable qualities, it has some limitations. Artists, and those commissioning sculpture, have to decide whether to allow the steel to rust, or to paint the surfaces. Rust signifies a process of decay and eventual disintegration, while paint needs a repaint every few years (though there is the alternative of the more expensive Corten steel in which the rust, in fact, forms a protective coating). Stainless steel, on the other hand, avoids these problems. From the beginning, Elderfield identified with stainless steel partly because of its longevity. " It can last as long as civilization " he claims, calling it a "naked, anticorrosive material with no need to paint or powder coat."

"I just knew I wanted to be a sculptor – I don't know why – there was never any other option. But if I hadn't been a sculptor I would have gone down the track of architecture."

Interestingly, his lack of formal training can be directly attributed to his keenness and determination to work with stainless steel. His attendance at art school at RMIT lasted a mere 20 days, for he found to his disappointment that he didn't have access to the material he wished to work with nor were there facilities for welding stainless steel on campus. Reminiscing, he said, "I decided to buy my own welding equipment and get straight into it!" And with that he withdrew from art school. "As I didn't have any formal training, no one said, 'You can't do that' so I simply did it!" Building up his skills by trial and error has literally meant that he has burnt his fingers many times, but it has also meant that he has now acquired great confidence in handling this intractable material.

Even early works such as *Maquette for Matriarch*, 2001, show an admirable control of the material; sensuous forms follow the curves of the female figure, ovoid negative shapes hint at sexual connotations and the etched surface suggests the pattern of fabric. Almost in spite of the cold metal, the work has a humanity and warmth, as indeed he discovered cold marble can convey profoundly human emotions. Bernini's Baroque masterpiece, *Apollo and Daphne*, which Elderfield saw in the Galleria Borghese in Rome, impressed him greatly for a number of reasons, not least the virtuosic control of the marble and the ability to combine fine detail with the grandeur of sculptural form. Four hundred years later, in a totally different society, working with totally different materials, Elderfield has a similar ambition.

In two subsequent works, *Flame* and *Leo*, both produced in 2003, Elderfield added the rich red colour of Redgum, which contributed both a colour and textural contrast to the reflective surface of the stainless steel – a contrast of natural and manufactured materials. And like *Matriarch*, *Flame* was an effective abstraction of known and recognisable forms with undulating shapes rippling rapidly upwards to culminate in a large flame-like form.

Sorbeck, 2004, like some of his earlier works, used negative ovoid recesses as focal points, but enveloped them in layer upon layer of enfolding forms. Standing tall, it reads as a plant form bursting upward with a vibrant sense of growth, like a giant bamboo shoot emerging from the soil. Technically it was very complex as each curving form had to be made separately – an extremely time-consuming process. Elderfield soon came to the conclusion that he needed to evolve a series of modular shapes and forms that would enable him to work more quickly and on a larger scale when appropriate. "So far my biggest work is seven metres, but the sky is the limit" he comments.

His next work, *Ozone*, 2005 was relatively small, but the use of pre-cut modular shapes opened up the possibility of almost unlimited repetition, a concept explored more fully in *Atomic #1*, also assembled in 2005. Looking at this beautifully realised work, one is immediately impressed by its architectural quality; it could indeed be a model for the tallest building in the world as it reaches ever upward, soaring sky high. Perhaps it was fortuitous that the architect Karl Fender was one of the judges for the Contempora Sculpture Award in 2007, for Elderfield was awarded the prize for *Atomic #1*. Also revealing is the artist's comment "I just knew I wanted to be a sculptor – I don't know why – there was never any other option. But if I hadn't been a sculptor I would have gone down the track of architecture."

His works are impeccably designed, though the casual observer, looking at the frequently repeated horizontals and emphatic verticals, which have to be precisely at right angles in works such as *Atomic #1*, *Spacebase*, 2005, and *Underworld*, 2006, would be quite unaware of the difficulty in achieving such precision. All metals expand when heated, so straight lines can bend, verticals distort and forms buckle during welding. Close observation of his work, interestingly, reveals some edges tacked together with a series of small welds in what appears to be a pleasant decorative pattern, but is actually a process of welding to avoid over-heating the metal, thus causing distortion. The self-taught sculptor has picked up many skills, enabling him to bring his ideas to fruition.

If there are some parallels with architecture, however, there are also some fundamental differences. One imagines that an architect only proceeds to actual building after plans and elevations have been drawn in great detail (with some exceptions, such as the Spanish architect Gaudi, whom Elderfield holds in high esteem), yet this sculptor doesn't make any drawings.

Right
Cogent
Stainless steel, bluestone
100 x 34 x 20 cm
Photograph Cricket

"Life is intrinsically linked to the mechanisms that shape our world. All that exists within our planet I see as one single self-regulating organism."

Left
Rare Earth
2008
Stainless steel, basalt
Photograph Cricket

Right
Underworld
2007
Stainless steel, bluestone
253 x 33 x 60 cm
Photograph Cricket

As he mentioned ruefully, "I have tried to sit down with an idea and work through it, but it never happens." Instead, his works grow intuitively, usually from the starting point of one shape, that he has drawn on the screen of his Wacon tablet. This he cuts on a sheet of vinyl and subsequently sprays with a fire retardant. Using this as a template on the sheet of stainless steel, Elderfield cuts the required shape by hand using a plasma cutter.

This irregular two-dimensional shape becomes the starting point from which the whole structure magically grows. His work bench nearby is cluttered with heaps of ready cut geometric shapes – variations of a circle, rectangles, squares, triangles, cylinders and triangular prisms – all ready to be added as the construction takes on life. It is as though he has designed his own individual Lego set of shapes. In an unorthodox manner, he holds the parts together with an extremely powerful circular magnet, which surprisingly, is left in the finished sculpture. Welding on a flat steel bench, as a way of maintaining the strict horizontal and vertical relationship of the parts, Elderfield slowly assembles the upward thrusting sculpture.

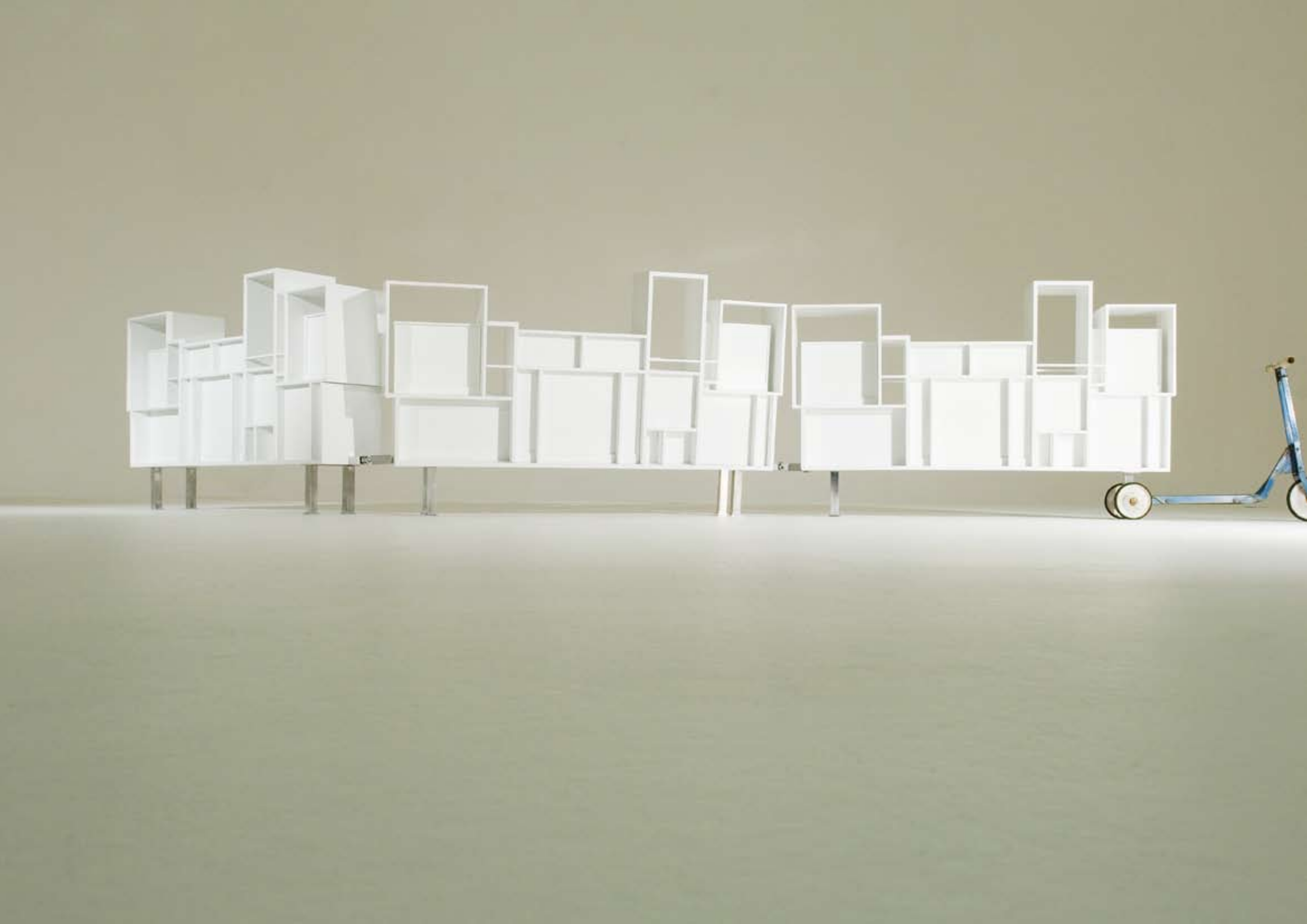
The incorporation of numerous geometric shapes, particularly the straight lines, the thin, spiky triangular prisms, the spheres and the squares, is reminiscent of the work of the great sculptor Arnaldo Pomodoro. But whereas the Italian allows part of the surfaces of his highly polished forms to disintegrate, revealing the complex forms hidden within, Elderfield dispenses with the outer shell entirely and reveals the intricate internal structure.

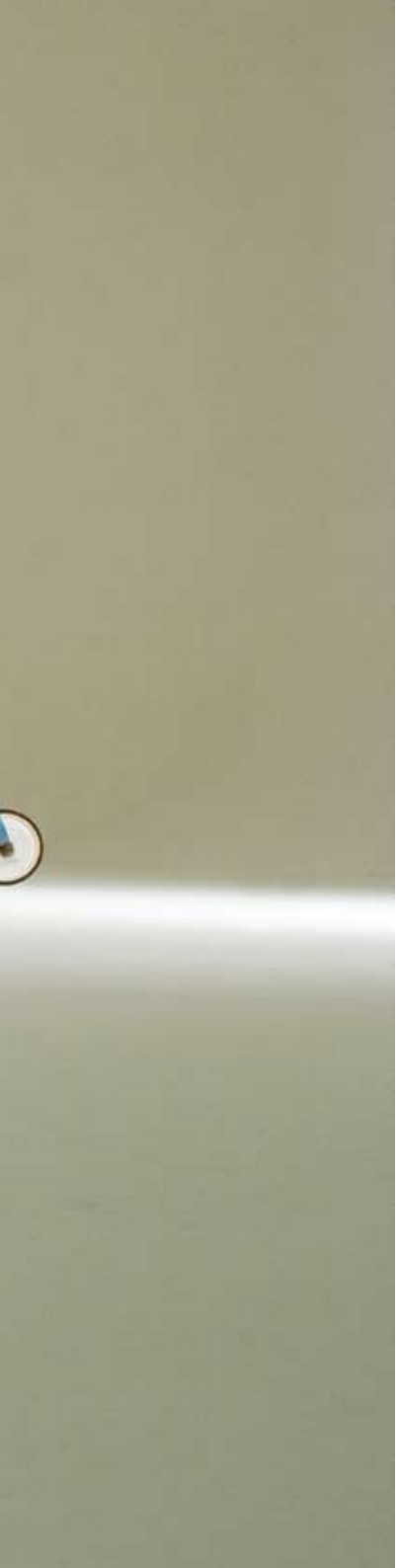
In an Australian context, one could also make a comparison with the early 'junk sculpture' of Robert Klippel, where he brought together and fused the organic and the mechanical. With Klippel's welded sculpture the organic aspect tended to be somewhat dominant and only in his later assemblages from wooden foundry patterns did the mechanistic win the battle. Elderfield would wish to achieve a balance, though natural materials are somewhat subservient in his works – the Redgum in early works was used, in effect, as accents, as were later on the fragments of basalt within the dominant stainless steel structure.

At a time when it is fashionable to believe that humankind is threatening nature with destruction, Elderfield holds to an optimistic point of view. "Life is intrinsically linked to the mechanisms that shape our world. All that exists within our planet I see as one single self-regulating organism." And while his work emanates confidence and idealism, he personally has a disarming quality of self-effacement. He can simply state," I have been extremely lucky in terms of sales," downplaying the quality of his work and attributing the popularity of his sculpture to the fact that stainless steel has become a favourite material for interior decorators, their chosen material for the fashionable kitchen.

Yet as an artist committed to sculpture, he realises that he has got to move beyond mere fashion, that for him "it is a life-long pursuit. Perfecting art is an infinite task. Perhaps that's the attraction of creativity – the limitless possibilities that keeps me coming back to sculpture." He has vivid memories of *Apollo and Daphne*, "a Baroque masterpiece that even Bernini himself admitted, some forty years later, he couldn't have done any better. I'll just be happy if I can say that once, after forty years of being a sculptor."

KEN SCARLETT





Honeywill

GREER HONEYWILL'S ARTISTIC PRACTICE IS A POWERFUL COMMENTARY ON THE UNEASY RELATIONSHIP AUSTRALIANS HAVE WITH THE MYRIAD PHYSICAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL DIMENSIONS ASSOCIATED WITH THE PLACE WE CALL 'HOME'.

References to the material culture of everyday life are worked and reworked into beautiful and haunting installations, challenging us to acknowledge that beneath the veneer of respectability, suburban dreams may eventually play havoc with our interior lives.

Honeywill is a contemporary weaver of everyday dreams, creating patterns from pieces of information carefully collected and filed from her endless observations of life. The physical and the phenomenological aspects of her work are then overlaid with the dimension of time and in doing so reveal the inescapable sense of loss, yearning and search for identity that characterises contemporary society. In her storytelling Honeywill embraces traditional and modern construction materials, found objects, digital technology, textiles and applied art techniques, often working collaboratively with the skills of artisans in order to access a particular technique.

The spaces we live in actively encourage or prevent movement and communication between inhabitants. The simple lines of a floor plan are in fact powerful determinants of behaviour, calling to mind the actions of Lars von Trier's characters in the film *Dogville* (2003), stiffened by the two-dimensional borders of their imaginary dwellings. Honeywill's own research led her to Howland, Deery and Owen's 1885 plans for a kitchenless apartment building. In the house form of *Elysium,* 2007, the apartment floor plan is hidden within the delicately pierced surface of the walls and roof. Honeywill created these patterns by injecting the disorder of real life into the idealised plan by subjecting it to a randomising computer program. This piece at once leads us to the remembrance of a childhood doll's house; a scene of child's play embodying the learning of future roles and routines. *Elysium* screens our imaginings of the life inside, providing only a tiny doorway, suggesting a self-contained and closed community, disconnected from the outside world.

Left
Shadowboxing
2008
Found object, wood, paint, metal fittings
45 x 397 x 80 cm
Photograph John Best

Right
Elysium
2007
Marine ply, mild steel, paint
136 x 150 x 56 cm
Photograph John Best

Virginia Woolf's, 'angel in the house', continues to exist, nowhere more obvious than in the commodification of home cooking. Celebrity cooks such as Nigella Lawson glamourise the ideals of perfect meals and family life. This is a far cry from Honeywill's memory of her mother, preparing wholesome food within a limited repertoire of recipes assembled by the Country Women's Association. This questioning of not only domestic labour, but constant consumerism, has been teased out in a number of the artist's works. *Untitled*, 2007, enshrines the twentieth century's equivalent of the 'cabinet of curiosities', the kitchen cabinet. Like the family, the kitchen cabinet is always hungry. Text from Honeywill's archive of shopping list books, documenting nearly three decades of domestic provisioning, is suspended on a transparent perspex plane in front of the cabinet. These lines of simple grocery items cast shadows over the cabinet's whiteness, inscribing the façade with the memory of repeated shopping expeditions.

Within this corpus of work, the apparent transparency of the home has been explored repeatedly through the literal and metaphoric forms of the cage and the timber house frame. These enclosures offer the subtle tension between freedom and confinement, opportunity and security. Honeywill's ephemeral installation work for the 2008 Montalto Sculpture Prize, *Architecture of the Heart*, 2008, placed the birdcage in the liminal space between abandonment and reclamation. Sited in an amphitheatre-like glade, the collection of one hundred bruised and rusting metal cages settled into the earth as if to disappear, while the multi-storied nature of the work attracted the curiosity of local birds, perhaps for their dwelling possibilities. As with many of Honeywill's works, this installation responds deeply to the qualities of light and shade in which it is placed, be that a gallery or a garden. Her structures invite quiet contemplation, yet the mixture of joy and sadness they rouse makes them akin to an anthem.

Patterns are repetitive by nature; attractive and alluring at first, but monotonous over time. *Variations on Monotony*, 2007, draws widely on the patterns of access and egress related to the fatal magnetism of our cities and employs motifs from the Melways guide to place. Hundreds of fillets of finely cut wood, like a learning game for children, stack to make a fictitious city skyline hovering above a grid of suburban streets. This work speaks of the constrictions of urban life, where each of us strives to keep a sense of individuality as we deal with the mundane.

Most recently Honeywill's work explores the promise of greater societal good offered by modernist architecture of the twentieth century. She interrogates what the modernists themselves were often blind to: that their noble ambitions would be largely 'lost in translation' when multiplied and standardised to accommodate suburban realities. The work, *Shadowboxing*, 2008, features a series of repeated white box and frame assemblages, which are strung together and towed forward, as if into the future, by a battered, once loved toy scooter.

Sited in an amphitheatre-like glade,
the collection of one hundred
bruised and rusting metal cages
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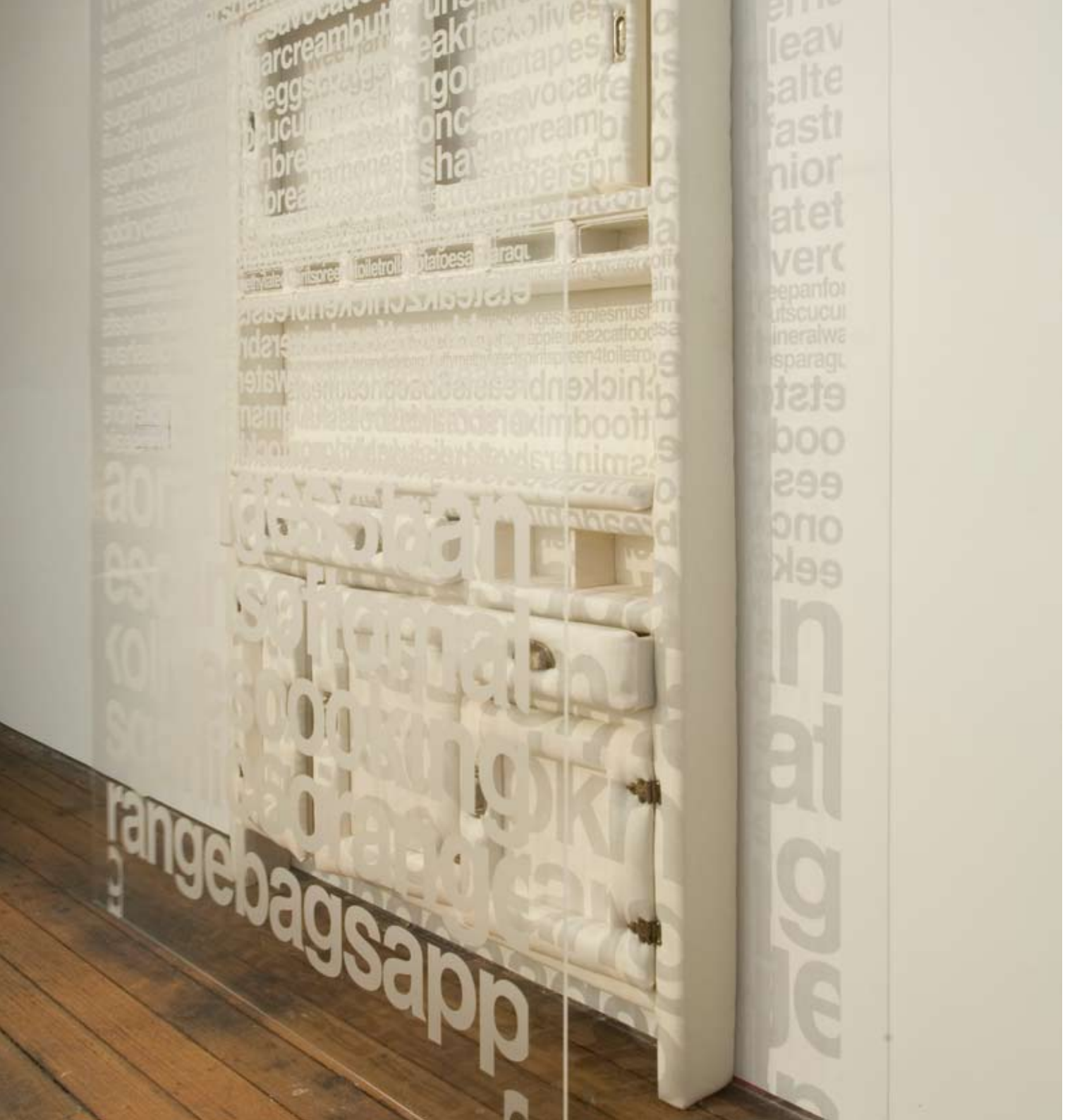
while the multi-storied nature
of the work attracted the curiosity
of local birds, perhaps for their
dwelling possibilities.

Right
Architecture of the Heart
2008
Deconstructed birdcages, tie wire
2.5 x 4 x 2 m
Photograph Sonia Payes



Left
Untitled
2007
Transformed wooden cabinet,
canvas, metal fittings,
marine ply, foam padding,
perspex, plastic type
200 x 140 x 41 cm
Photograph John Best

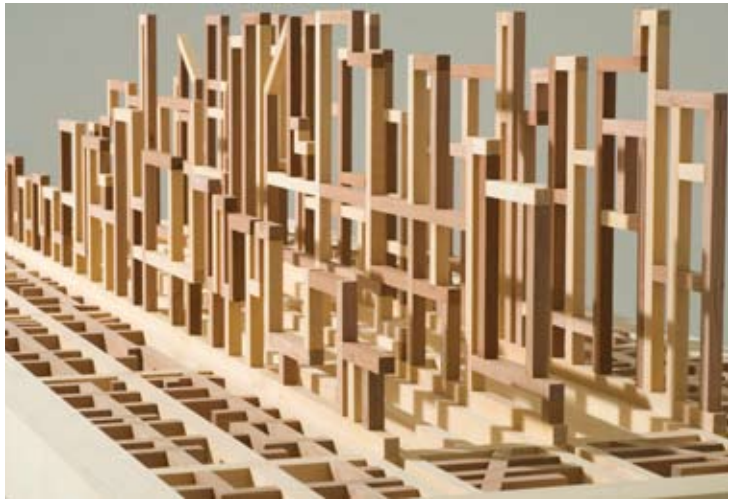
Right
Variations on Monotony
2007
Three timbers
126 x 150 x 56 cm
Photograph John Best
(detail)

The frames, with their pattern of compartments, are miniature versions of the seaside façade of Paul Rudolph's Milam House (1959-1961), built in Ponte Vedra, Florida. Honeywill was drawn to the façade of this house because it reminded her of the shadow boxes found in ordinary homes in the 1950s and 60s. Once again, Honeywill employs the shadow, and its connotations of the 'other self' with bold dreams and dark thoughts, to engage with her audience.

The home and life in suburbia have long been viewed as utopian ideals that can be branded and purchased from a catalogue, with the expectation that happiness will be delivered and all dreams 'accommodated' in the dwelling. Honeywill constantly queries these ideals: are our houses 'fit' for our desires and conversely, can we fit our growing material and emotional needs into suburban life? We have not begun to reign in our quest to consume land and trees for family life. For our collective survival, can we afford not to?

TRACEY AVERY

Once again, Honeywill employs the shadow, and its connotations of the 'other self' with bold dreams and dark thoughts, to engage with her audience.



Maas

HER STUDIO IS IN THE BACKYARD BUT TO GET THERE MARISE MAAS WALKS AT LEAST FIVE KILOMETRES ALONG THE WIDE, FLAT ALTONA STREETS. IT'S REALLY EARLY WHEN SHE STARTS OUT SO THERE'S NOT MUCH TRAFFIC AND ALL IS CALM AND QUIET.

Far left
Opposite of Eager
2008
Oil on canvas
150 x 200 cm
Photograph Ian Hill

Left
Raring to Go
2008
Oil on canvas
150 x 200 cm
Photograph Ian Hill
(detail)

As she walks, she notices the patterns on the walls, the discarded objects on the road, the designs of the gardens, the colours of the fences. She ends up in the airy, open main drag eating breakfast, and then she winds her way back again.

Not so long ago, she passed an old woman with a brush and can of green paint standing out on the footpath touching up her front fence. It had been tagged by graffitists and the woman was saying to her neighbour, "They come in the night, you know, they come in the night. And I never hear them." And the way that fence was smeared in different tones of green and the way the woman herself was so intently bent over that can of paint made it look like she had been patching up the fence for years.

That is exactly the sort of thing that appeals to Maas. It's both comfortably small-world and quietly idiosyncratic. Maas' work has long had an unfussy-feeling of domesticity about it. She paints what's going on around her – pieces of fruit, home-appliances, horses (because she lives in Altona she doesn't have any but they were her favourite animal as a child) and it's all a touch scratchy and floaty and off-centre with lots of empty space.

The little jumpers she painted in her last show were prompted by her children and the way her oldest son has just learnt to put one on himself; but the teeth – single molars with roots attached, milk ones and what looks to be a whole mouthful of sharp protrusions – stemmed from her own childhood. Her parents saved both her and her siblings' teeth in individually marked boxes and her father recently scanned them and sent them to her. In other works, she painted the tea strainer that has made several repeat appearances over the years, a glass jar full of pegs and a special fork that also acts as a knife and spoon.

"I think with my painting, a lot of it is about the act of doing it, I let a lot of stuff just happen, as if it's a sketchbook."

While Maas' unashamedly awkward horses might be a bit Susan Rothenberg, if you had to link all her work to a style, it would be to the mid-twentieth-century Cobra movement, which, like Maas, was largely influenced by primitive art, being semi-abstract, slightly distorted and sometimes brilliantly coloured. There's a hint of outsider art in her work too and, because Maas is so conscious of not over-working anything, she rarely makes studies and always has several paintings on the go at once.

"I think with my painting, a lot of it is about the act of doing it, I let a lot of stuff just happen, as if it's a sketchbook," she says. "I have nothing against deep and meaningful art but the way I start a work is more meditative where I just forget myself and then I'll step back and look at what I've got and then I might start introducing objects or shapes and then I will realise that some little story has come out of it but I don't plan that beforehand."

One of the best things she took away from art school (she studied printmaking at the Tasmanian School of Art, graduating in 1991), she says, was learning how to loosen up. She was an "immaculate drawer" when growing up, producing "laborious" portraits and domestic scenes. "And then I realised I wasn't getting that much joy out of it. It was a big labour just to make it look really real and then I thought that old thing about how I might as well take a photo, I am not feeling anything of myself coming into this."

One of her Tasmanian lecturers suggested that to put an end to "this restrictive behaviour" she start drawing with her left hand and stop looking at what she was actually drawing. Another art-school exercise was never to take the pencil off the page, just to keep the line going.

Though it all comes naturally now, for the same "loosening up" reasons, she mainly paints from memory. Occasionally she might take an object into her studio while she paints it, always straight onto the canvas, sometimes over and over again as if she is practising. "You do end up with quite a lot of things that weren't meant to happen but then you look at them and think that's probably the strongest part of the work because you couldn't plan that and it's got a more spontaneous feel. It's nice to be able to grab mistakes and use them and that took me quite a while to learn. It's like the child who says, I am going to draw a factory where they have crayfish, for example. And they just draw it, they don't have to go and research exactly what a crayfish looks like."

The morning Maas saw the woman painting over the graffiti on her front fence she did sketch her when she got home but she insists it didn't work very well and that she finds drawing people really hard. "That's why I do horses. It just takes one little spot or one little line for the mood to look completely different." So she will probably do part of the fence and portray how she had been tirelessly patching it up, possibly over decades.

Despite Maas' penchant for this off-centre sort of patchiness, some of her paintings don't get any texture at all because she will paint a flat background in a strong colour, like a brilliant red, and then draw onto it with oil crayon, often a crisp white. Even where her pictures are built up with more painterly layers, there's a strong graphic element and creative play with empty space.

Horses aside though, there is not much of the natural world in her paintings, even though at one stage, she wanted to study biology when she left school. Maas was born in a small town in Utrecht, The Netherlands, and, with her family, moved to Penguin on the north-west coast of Tasmania when she was 13. She found the shift difficult initially and, after art school, went to Amsterdam for more than four years to decide for herself where to live.

Maas returned to Australia more than a decade ago and has been supporting herself as an artist for the past nine years and is overtly against making "big explanations" for her paintings. "It gets my back up a little bit when art needs to be explained really largely with the written word. I think there is a place for it but it's just not the way I operate, I would just get really bored."

She only reads about one in five of the articles in the art magazines she has lying around her studio for the same reason, but she keeps buying them for their images. There's lots of work that catches her eye. It's partly because Maas spends so much time alone (she likes it too much she says) that she makes a point of going to art exhibitions.

Rght
The Situation was Highly Sensitive
2004
185 x 185 cm
Photograph Ian Hill

"I want to stay up to date a little bit. You know if you have music that you really like and you're getting older and you think in your time the music was the best, well, I just don't want to become one of those people with art. You forget that there's always good stuff coming out in every generation."

As for her, she likes to glorify the banal things. "I don't know that I do it on purpose," she says. "It's just that it comes out like that, so it must be a little bit of a subconscious thing."

MEGAN BACKHOUSE

"You do end up with quite a lot of things that weren't meant to happen but then you look at them and think that's probably the strongest part of the work because you couldn't plan that and it's got a more spontaneous feel. It's nice to be able to grab mistakes and use them and that took me quite a while to learn."

Left
Long Sleeved
2007
Oil on canvas
150 x 200 cm

Right
Tooth
2007
200 x 150 cm

Ryan

IN 1822 THE GERMAN ROMANTIC PAINTER CASPAR DAVID FRIEDRICH EXECUTED ONE OF HIS MOST POWERFUL PAINTINGS, *THE LONELY TREE*. IT IS A PORTRAIT OF MELANCHOLY, A SOLITARY ICON STANDING AMIDST THE CHILL OF EUROPEAN WINTER, ITS FELLOWS LONG SINCE PUT TO THE AXE.

One hundred and five years later, the essentially romantic Australian painter Kathryn Ryan painted *Bants Quarry Silhouette*, a similarly stark image of a lone tree.

While vastly different in tonality, these two works share a common theme. Both exude a strange loneliness, but while Friedrich's work is clearly melancholic, Ryan's seems defiant. Friedrich's tree is clearly in the last stages of a long and cruel life. Ryan's cypress, while perhaps battered by the elements, remains heavy with foliage, its strength enduring and ongoing.

In a day and age when contemporary art seems overwhelmed by video works and computer gimmickry, Ryan herself also seems defiant. Unwilling to go along with the fashions of the times she has stuck with painting with fervour.

Ryan is an artist who grew up on her parents' rural property, and the titling of her works has a farm-bound pragmatism that is undeniable. One suspects that one could visit Sampsons Ford and find the very tree depicted in *Sampsons Ford,* 2006; one could no doubt find the pine trees depicted in *South West Pines* ,2007 that was exhibited in the 2007 Wynne Prize at the Art Gallery of New South Wales. Describing these as highly personal works would be an understatement. Her studio walls in Melbourne's CBD are crowded with photographs of the landscape in which she grew up and it is not hard to imagine each tree holding a childhood secret.

But simultaneously there is a universality to Ryan's trees that takes them beyond their rural roots. Many of these trees are the remnants of once vast forests cleared for agricultural use. As such they act as memories of times long gone when giant marsupials roamed the woodlands. They act as ghosts of primordial times.

Left
South West Evening
2007
Oil on canvas
122 x 183 cm
Photograph Tim Gresham

Right
View to Mt Emu Creek
2007
Oil on canvas
183 x 137 cm
Photograph Tim Gresham

Her trees and landscapes are
essentially metaphors for both the
artist herself and for human nature in general.

Part of this unsettling effect is Ryan's highly individualistic technique. She has pared down her palette and at times there is only the hint of a grayish green amidst the foliage. Elsewhere she paints her silhouettes in layers of blue, as though a ghost-like cloud has enveloped the fields.

Ryan spends three to four months on each canvas, slowly building up the work's own history, layer upon layer, to achieve her concerns with depth, harmony, light, space and balance. The resulting surfaces are almost photographic; majestic trees float in an ethereal space, juxtaposed against an ambiguous fog.

The finished paintings suggest a balancing of the qualities of strength and fragility, confidence and uncertainty, essence and ambiguity. Her trees and landscapes are essentially metaphors for both the artist herself and for human nature in general. Ryan herself has said, "The silhouette pines are intimate portraits. I am drawn to the beauty, the delicate, fragile and sensitive qualities of the battered and ageing cypress pines, contrasted with the serene and evocative space of the landscape."

The landscape has of course dominated Australian art and culture from before white settlement through to today. It is imbedded in our literature – Patrick White's *A Fringe of Leaves*, Gerald Murnane's *The Plains*. It is central to our cinema from *Mad Max* to *Picnic at Hanging Rock*. And in many ways it is the bedrock of our visual art. From Colonial times to the Angry Penguins, through to today the landscape is imprinted on our cultural language. Ryan fits into a contemporary lineage that embraces such diverse artists as Philip Wolfhagen, Philip Hunter, Catherine Woo and numerous others.

What is intriguing is the variety of approaches Australia's landscape offers. For some it is the harsh desert, for others it is the jungles of the North. Some travel from the city to visit and report back. Kathryn Ryan is a local; she grew up in south-west Victoria.

Hers is a highly personal interpretation of the landscape. In many ways it created her. It is a part of her youth, a part of her experience and a part of her imagination. She doesn't paint with objectivity – she paints these vistas because they are a part of her.

Growing up in the country rather than the inner city gives one a sense of space that most miss out on. Contemporary art is often a claustrophobic affair, over-filled with conceptual detritus that barely gives room to breathe. Ryan's work on the other hand takes its cue from the stretching limbs of the trees as they embrace the sky.

There is a lyrical softness to Ryan's work that one would never encounter in Russell Drysdale's outback. There are of course days during summer in south-west Victoria which are distinctly cruel, when the sun blasts down on drought-stricken fields and colours are bleached. But this is not the rural world that Ryan has opted for; hers are the misty autumn mornings when light is gently dispersed over the land and for all of the immense and intricate detail of her paintings, the painstakingly depicted branches and leaves, there is an overall sense of dreamy haziness to her work that allows the mind to wander up and down her branches.

The visual vista of the land, the years witnessing time, weather, seasons and the placement of these resilient trees against the space of dairy paddocks and vast skies has been deeply embedded in Ryan's visual memory. "It probably takes me back in general to life on the farm in a family of twelve with lots of space, and solitude on the land," she says. Despite hailing from a large family, any farm upbringing has its elements of isolation and Ryan sees solitude as a necessary and potentially positive state in which one can confront major issues. And, of course, there are few more isolated environs than those of the artists' studios.

"I see a great deal of similarity between practising as an artist, being a farmer, and following some spiritual path," she says. "They all require a great deal of faith, belief, and stamina! Although I don't follow an organised religion, certain qualities remain: ritual, substance, consistency."

In many ways 'space' is the key word here. For all their pragmatic sourcing and careful rendering, Ryan's subjects seem to float in a netherworld of the imagination. The hard timber becomes translucent, hinting at the mortality

Left
Cudgee Tree
2005
Oil on canvas
76 x 183 cm
Photograph Tim Gresham

Right
South West Pines
2007
Oil on canvas
137 x 183 cm
Photograph Tim Gresham

of all living things, the passing of time and the temporal moment of our existence on this mortal coil. Somehow, like those of pagan belief before us, we sense these images as portraits, as individual and idiosyncratic as a solitary person. In essence her trees become metaphors for our own existence, the fact that in many ways we remain alone, our deepest thoughts and feelings impossible to divulge.

By capturing the spirit of her subject Ryan tackles the notion of the sublime and of a perfect contemplative state. There is the desire to unify the practical and humble farm references with the more sublime qualities of the landscape, seeing beyond the obvious and descriptive. But both maintain their place and relevance. At times these rural references become explicit; we can see the border fences of the field, the sense of well-ordered farm life that is a necessity for survival. At other times she eschews any such sense of reality, allowing the viewer the space to roam. And as such these works are often timeless, trees that could be standing before the presence of humans on Planet Earth, a symbol of pure and unadulterated nature.

Looking at these paintings one finds a sense of silence, of calm, a world without the chaos of contemporary life. A moment of respite, a dimension devoid of harried commuters and screaming cell phones. For a moment all of these things drop away.

And these works clearly resonate. In recent years Ryan has been short-listed for several major art awards including the Wynne Prize in 2000, 2004 and 2007; the Alice Prize in 1998, 1999 and 2001, and the Hutchins Art Prize in 1998, 1999 and 2001. In 1998 Ryan was awarded the Jacaranda Acquisitive Drawing Award and in 1990 the BP Acquisitive Prize. Ryan's works have been purchased by the curators and advisers for the Macquarie Group Collection, the Warrnambool Art Gallery Collection and Artbank. For a no-nonsense farm girl, Ryan has captured a moment of sublime timelessness that resonates with the viewers long after their first encounter, touching that *deus ex arcadia* of which we subconsciously dream.

ASHLEY CRAWFORD

Right
Rosebrook
2007
Oil on paper
72 x 52 cm
Photograph Tim Gresham

Far left
The South West
2005
Oil on canvas
76 x 183 cm
Photograph Tim Gresham

By capturing the spirit of her subject Ryan tackles the notion of the sublime and of a perfect contemplative state.

Sparks

THERE ARE MANY MAN-MADE WONDERS ON EARTH. NO MATTER WHERE ONE TRAVELS, THERE ARE BUILDINGS AND STRUCTURES THAT CAN MAKE ONE GASP IN AWE.

These are of course balanced with nature's own miraculous constructions; the mountains and jungles. Generations of travellers have stood in awe at the spectacle of Angkor Watt or the Valley of the Kings, at the first glimpse of Kilimanjaro or Uluru. That the world is a place of wonder is beyond dispute. Sadly all too many only get to witness this through the cathode glow of the television set.

Valerie Sparks is a traveller of another mind-set. Her photo-media works are a cornucopia of exoticism, a palimpsest of cultural difference brought to a strange, idyllic harmony. Upon first glimpsing these works one is unbalanced, unsure whether this is a Tolkienesque fantasy land. But simultaneously we recognise this world as our own. It is as though Sparks has travelled the world, a bower bird adventurer scouring the planet for the exotic, allowing us a glimpse of a realm of architectural extremes, snow-capped mountains and fecund plant life.

While she has created magnificent renderings of mountain-scapes and odd plant life, it is her most recent work that brings her audience to a stand-still. *El Dorado Springs* is a coup, an architectural folly of monumental proportions simultaneously soothing and unnerving. Sitting at six by one metres it is an epic work in the truest sense. Viewers are engulfed by her strange alien world. It is equal parts Asian and European, Antipodean and Middle Eastern. It is a florid swamp from which ancient architectural designs emerged. Palm trees and orchids thrive, and one can almost smell the richness of the land upon which this strange city has been built. It is fantastical. And, strangely, it all feels familiar. The eucalypt and the palm tree swaying side by side, the gothic and the Buddhist sitting parallel in harmony. Why? because it is Melbourne. But it is a Melbourne in which architectural mediocrity has been excised.

Left
El Dorado Springs
2007
Inkjet print on paper
100 x 600 cm
(detail)

Right
The Event
Inkjet print on paper
100 x 720 cm
(detail)

Nothing is what is seems in Sparks' work.

Wallpaper becomes foliage, foliage becomes fixture.

Outside and inside become indifferent

and abstract notions.

A city of beliefs sitting harmoniously side by side, a city of ziggurats and mosques, where Buddhist, Hindu, Christian and Muslim have come to a celebratory moment of inclusion. Despite their glaring differences, in Sparks' world these places of worship sit side by side, revelling in their differences.

Where *El Dorado Springs* is so unnerving is in the immediate, but misplaced, sense of recognition. Sparks has become an architectural photo-journalist from another reality. Here, belying animosity and celebrating their inherent sources, sit an Albanian Mosque, St Patrick's Cathedral in East Melbourne, Brunswick's Russian Orthodox Church, the Vietnamese Buddha in Reservoir, a Sikh Temple in Craigieburn and the Hindu Temple in Carrum. To be sure Melbourne is a multicultural city, but here those disparate elements that make the city a sometimes uncomfortable melting pot, find cohesion and celebration.

Sparks' deliberate cropping of these images is telling. The vista clearly goes beyond the frame; this is only a part of a far larger world. The eye is drawn into the exquisite detail of the architecture and then is drawn out by the hazy surrounds. It is deliberately impossible to capture the whole.

While much digitally based art produced today seems determined to replicate the dazzling virtual reality of William Gibson's cyberpunk masterpiece *Neuromancer*, what many fail to grasp is that what makes that novel work is the grittiness of the novel's 'real' world. While her works may be fantastical, Sparks succeeds in anchoring them to our own world. While she may be utilising cutting-edge technology, she is not portraying a world of bits and bytes. She is recreating a decidedly concrete world, albeit very selectively.

Despite her media, that of digitally enhanced photography, the results have an almost painterly sensibility that borders on the surreal. The careful juxtaposition of forms, the lyrical play of colour, the surreal sensibility, have both little and everything to do with reality. She forces her viewer to pause and reconsider. Recent works such as *This Is Not a Wallflower*, 2007 shift the exterior into the interior, a florid flowering plant becomes a chandelier. The strangely terrifying *The Event*, 2006 is simply apocalyptic – a dark Stygian glowering sky is foregrounded by a tree that recalls the mushroom cloud of nuclear annihilation.

A core inspiration for Sparks are the scenic panoramic wallpapers of Europe. Today we escape via the television or computer screens. In seventeenth and eighteenth Century Europe, alongside painting and stained glass, the walls themselves were made into panoramas, vistas of Arcadian wilderness and baroque architecture. A sitting room would become a 'virtual' reality. In her meticulous quest for inspiration Sparks managed to access the huge wallpapers in the storage rooms of the Musée des Arts décoratifs, Paris. "The wallpapers explored fantasies of travel, colonial expansion and a fascination with the exotic," she says of the experience. "They often collapsed geographical space and time through incorporating a variety of locations into a seamless continuous image of a European garden – they are obsessively rendered exquisite fantasies. In my landscapes and installations this is not a foggy uncertain dream space. The hyper-real detail of the photographic medium and the confusion of the rules of perspective make these utopian visions convincing and yet impossible at the same time."

To say that these works are multi-faceted would be an understatement. Sparks is an architectural detective and archeologist of the arcane. The research and execution span the extremes of aged French wallpapers created during a period of colonial expansion through to cutting edge technology during a period of globalisation and digital revolution. She is a resurrectionist, pulsing new life into forgotten architectural tropes.

Left
With a View to Paradise Gallery
Lightjet print on photo paper
105 x 185 cm

Right
El Dorado Spings
2007
Inkjet print on paper
100 x 600 cm

The Organisation of the View View 2

Her palimpsest of places of worship carries with it a sociological and socio-political element that cannot be ignored. Sparks' fantastical imagery is rooted both in history and in the here and now. While she gives us pause for contemplation, she also takes us on a shimmering ride to a world distorted for our own edification.

ASHLEY CRAWFORD

"The wallpapers explored fantasies of travel, colonial expansion and a fascination with the exotic," she says of the experience.

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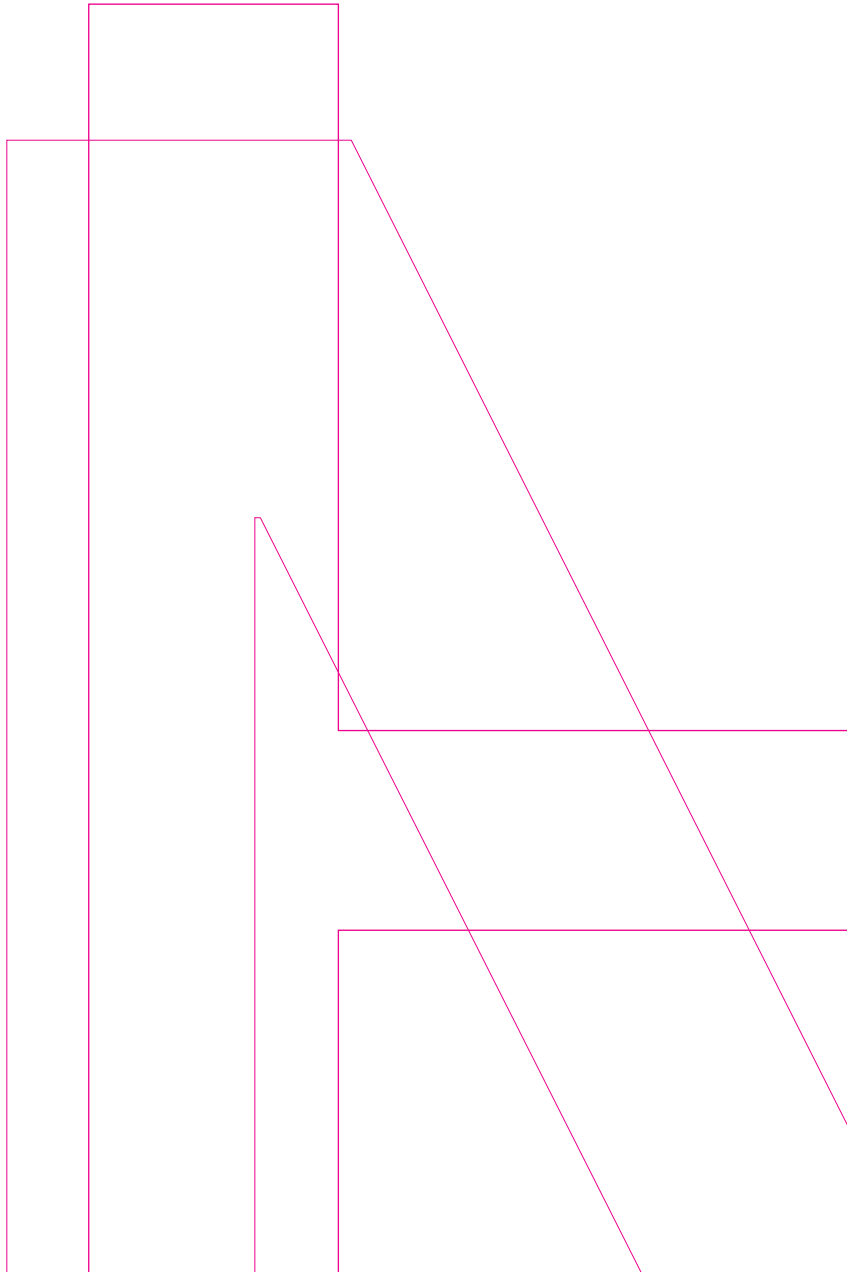

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