

FULL FRONTAL

FULL FRONTAL: IMAGES FROM WITHIN THE STUDIO

AUTHORS:

JONATHAN HOLMES & PAUL ZIKA

ARTISTS:

TRUDI BRINCKMAN

JOHN BARBOUR

DALE HICKEY

GEOFF LOWE

JOHN R. NEESON

JOHN NIXON

JACKY REDGATE

PLIMSOLL GALLERY, UNIVERSITY OF TASMANIA



Dale Hickey's Studio.
Circa 1974.

FULL FRONTAL: FOREWORD

This exhibition has evolved from research on the painter Dale Hickey. Hickey was one of six mid-career artists nominated for detailed analysis in the final phase of an Australian Research Council (ARC) Linkage Grant between the University of Tasmania and the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery (2002-5). The Research Group of Jonathan Holmes, Paul Zika, Maria Kunda and Jeff Malpas (from the University of Tasmania) and David Hansen (from TMAG) investigated the role that solo survey exhibitions played in the presentation of Australian art in public art museums over the past four decades.

The original proposal was to mount satellite group exhibitions at the Plimsoll Gallery in tandem with each of the resultant solo survey shows at the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery. While the exhibition Dale Hickey: Life in a box is now scheduled for the Ian Potter Museum of Art/The University of Melbourne in February 2008, I was still keen to develop a related exhibition to be seen in Hobart, but scheduling has determined that this exhibition pre-empts the major survey.

From around 1982 Dale Hickey has concentrated almost exclusively on his immediate working environment and the objects that exist within it. There is a constant reworking/rearranging of a range of things – easel, trestle table, blank canvas, auto-tray and a range of smaller objects - presented frontally within a shallow stage-like space. There is a continual ambiguous play between the objects represented within the painted room and on the illustrated canvas, and the delineation of the canvas itself (where does it start and end). The blank canvas becomes an object, or the simple grid division on the surface is confused with the frame of the window.

This exhibition focuses on artists dealing with ordinary deadpan objects found in their studio and their translation into images. Furthermore it is the compression of pictorial space (even where there is the incorporation of the third dimension) and the orchestrated frontality that confronts the viewer.

Paul Zika

Paul Cezanne's studio on the 'chemin des Lauves' above the town of Aix-en-Provence in southern France has been left pretty much as it was when it was photographed by the young artist Emile Bernard in 1904. When James Lord visited it for the first time in 1950 he described the moment he entered the upstairs room as 'one of the most exalting, deeply moving experiences of [his] life.' He went on to say:

The large, high room was in considerable disorder, but it was Cezanne's disorder, and one felt that he might have stepped outside but a few minutes before to paint a watercolor of his beloved mountain viewed from the nearby hilltop. The artist's easel, paint box, palettes, paintbrushes and dried tubes of paint occupied a corner. The north wall held a vast window. Upon a long shelf against the west wall were aligned many bottles, vases, dishes, sugar bowls, candlesticks, skulls and other items instantly familiar to anyone who knew the many majestic still lifes in which they appeared. There were in addition several pieces of furniture also familiar from still lifes painted before the studio was built.¹

Photographs of the light-filled studio as it is now show the plaster statuette of a cupid thought to have been a copy after a work by the renowned Provençal sculptor, Pierre Puget (1620-1694).² It sits upon a rustic chest of drawers beneath the long, crockery-laden shelf described by James Lord. It must have been brought to Les Lauves along with all of the other studio paraphernalia when Cezanne moved in during September 1902. And set beside it is a dish, which might easily have been the one that held the four apples that form such an intense contrast in their greens, yellows and reds against the pristine whiteness of the statuette in *Still Life with Plaster Cast* [1895, Oil on paper board, 70.6 x 57.3 cm. Courtauld Institute, London]. In that painting, the apples' colours are caught up in the surface of the statuette, almost as if the plaster is sucking in the hues.

1 Lord, James 'Saving Cezanne's studio: the author recalls his youthful efforts to preserve Cezanne's final studio in Aix-en-Provence, and the disillusion that followed his successful campaign – Memoir,' *Art in America*, July, 2002

2 I have been working from the photograph of Cezanne's studio available on the Getty Museum website (<http://www.getty.edu/art/exhibitions/cezanne>). It was published in the catalogue of their exhibition *Cezanne in the Studio: Still Life in Watercolours*, [Carol Armstrong], Los Angeles, J.Paul Getty Museum, 2004. Photograph by Christophe Duranti.

On another painted chest of drawers nearer to the enormous north-facing window are three human skulls that found their way, either singly or as a group, into numerous Cezanne still lifes during the 1890s and the early 1900s. *Three Skulls* [1902-1906] in the Art Institute of Chicago, for instance, is a watercolour with flecks of gouache and graphite, in which the skulls have been set upon a piece of tapestry or a scrunched up scrap of carpet.³ In this work they have been treated as bleached forms and their contours have been heightened, while their hollowness and emptiness is emphasised as the eye sockets and nose cavities seem to draw up the colour of the fabric into their vacant spaces. There is a curious angular shape of a table – an object that crops up on many occasions in Cezanne’s studio paintings of the 1890s – that could be a backdrop or might be an actual tabletop. It is difficult to tell because Cezanne has tried, successfully, to emphasise the frontality of the objects and everything – the table, the fabric and the skulls – is faced full on so that each reads as a separate but integrated two-dimensional plane. It’s a breathtaking device. It is as if Cezanne has looked at the profile of the vertical table from a kneeling position, the three skulls from a sitting position, and the fabric from above, and then brought the combination of observations together in a single painterly thought, reconciled on the picture plane.

Closer to the window there is a portrait-sized easel which is probably the one that was used to support the canvas and stretcher of *Still Life with Apples and Peaches* [c.1905, Oil on canvas, 81 x 100.5 cm. National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.]. One can imagine Cezanne setting up the still life in that north-west corner of the studio, maybe drawing the curtains a little, so that an earthy golden light would flood over the still life on the table. The table with scalloped edge depicted in the photograph is the support for the still life and he has taken down a pitcher with a floral motif, a dish and a fluted bowl from the long shelf that was stacked with dishes, vases, bottles, pewter ware, covered jars and other kitchen and dining accoutrements – the sorts of things that are gathered up in a lifetime of domesticity. These items become props, along with a floral drape and a tablecloth and an abundant grouping of fruit. Almost everything on the table seems to have been observed from a slightly different position – as if the artist has moved the easel around the tableau. The pitcher looks as though it has been painted whilst Cezanne was positioned square on to the table; the table and a dish of apples appear to have been represented from above; and yet the completed composition is seen as if from the leading right hand edge of the table.

Robert Hughes made the point in *The Shock of the New* that ‘the eye and its objects inhabit the same plane, the same field, and they influence one another mutually and reciprocally.’⁴ This scientific investigation of this concept by F.H.

3 The image of *Three Skulls* is available on the Art Institute of Chicago’s website (<http://www.artic.edu/aic/index.php>): Cezanne, Paul *Three Skulls* 1902-1906, Watercolour, with graphite and touches of gouache, on ivory wove paper, 48 x 62.8 cm. Olivia Shaler Swan Collection

4 Hughes, Robert *The Shock of the New* London: Thames and Hudson, 1990[1980], p.17

Bradley, Alfred North Whitehead and Albert Einstein was only just coming to be known by a wider audience in the late 1890s and it is interesting to observe that, in his own way, using the studio and the landscape of Provence as his laboratory, Cezanne found a way of representing this in his paintings, watercolours and drawings. Later, Hughes remarks that it was the historian and critic, Barbara Rose, who demonstrated that Cezanne had changed a principal axiom of the craft of painting from 'This is what I see,' to 'Is this what I see?' – a fundamentally different concept brought about by intense scrutiny of the world from the vantage point of the studio.⁵ It's no wonder then that Cezanne's impact on the cubists, fauvists and futurists would be so profound – his paintings not only show us what we see, but also how we see.

Only three years after Cezanne painted *Still Life with Apples and Peaches* [1905] in the studio at the 'chemin des Lauves', Pablo Picasso was photographed for Celett Burgess in his studio in the Bateau-Lavoir in the district of Montmartre in Paris.⁶ During July the year before the photograph was taken, Picasso had brought to completion one of the signature works of the twentieth century, *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* [1907, Oil on canvas, 243.9 x 233,7 cm. Museum of Modern Art, New York].

According to William Rubin, although Picasso had been aware of the collections of African and Pacific art that Matisse, Derain and Vlaminck had been acquiring, it wasn't until sometime after the completion of *Les Demoiselles* that Picasso became an avid observer and collector.⁷ By 1908 we can see Picasso in the Bateau Lavoir photograph seated on the edge of a large pot-bellied stove and the image is dominated by the presence of African and Pacific sculpture. There is a Yombe Composite Group, a series of tiny figurines in a housing that sits upon the figure of an elephant that had come from the Congo; there is a Punu *Harp* from the Gabon; and a pair of *Roof Finial Figures* from New Caledonia. They were all part of a growing collection of primitive sculpture that Picasso had begun acquiring from around early 1908.⁸

In the groundbreaking cubist painting, *Portrait of Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler* [1910, oil on canvas, 100.6 x 72.8 cm], which is now in the Art Institute of Chicago, Picasso, has drawn in the striated crown of the male finial figure he had acquired two years before. It sits just to the left of Kahnweiler's head and above a still life arranged beside the seated model. Rubin suggests that Picasso's collection of primitive art was eclectic but the works themselves continued to feature prominently in the props of the studio and as a source of inspiration throughout

5 Hughes [1990], p.18

6 Milner, John *The Studios of Paris: The capital of art in the late nineteenth century* New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1988, pp.188-189

7 Rubin, William 'Picasso' in *Primitivism in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern*, 2 Volumes [edited by William Rubin], New York, Museum of Modern Art, 1984, p.265

8 Rubin [1984], p. 299



Dale Hickey.
Untitled, 2005

Picasso's artistic life. Claude Picasso photographed a storeroom at Picasso's villa *La Californie* in 1974, and several dozen sculptures ranging from reliquary figures, masks and the finial figures can be seen.⁹

The paintings, sculptures, collages and drawings that Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque produced in the period from 1908 through to 1914 – the most challenging period of cubism – were dominated by the props that surrounded them in their studios. The drop-leaf table seen in the 1908 photograph of Picasso's studio, featured regularly as the support for the myriad still lifes that appeared in the cubist works of this period. In a photograph of Braque in his studio in 1911, the artist can be seen playing an accordion and the space is full of props and artefacts. A mandolin and violin hangs on the wall next to a Fang Mask from Gabon [Painted wood and fibre, 32 cm high. Private Collection]. The violin and a large water pitcher that can be seen in the foreground of the photo were probably the subjects of *Violin and Pitcher* [1910, Oil on canvas, 117 x 73 cm. Kunstmuseum, Basel] – a great early cubist work which also includes a *trompe l'oeil* tack that gives the eye a clue to where the objects in the space sit in relation to the wall behind.

As with Cezanne, there is an indissoluble nexus between the *stuff* of the studio and the experimental works of Picasso and Braque during this great period of creativity. While the formal and conceptual advances they made remain quite breathtaking in their ambition and resolution, the actual subject matter was relatively mundane – musical instruments, kitchenware, wine bottles, vases, the daily newspapers, second-hand chairs, fruit, a glass, a piece of chair caning. And the figure – almost like another object in the workplace – also plays an important part, especially in the work of Picasso, where it's as if the sitters themselves become part of the still lifes. Later in their careers, Braque and Picasso would occupy studios that were far more spacious than the cramped conditions they experienced in their work places on the Rue d'Orsel and at the Bateau Lavoir in Montmartre in the early 1900s. On the other hand, when the sculptor Alberto Giacometti moved into his second studio in the Rue Hippolyte-Maindron in the Montparnasse district in 1927, where he was to remain for the rest of his life, he did the opposite: the studio he occupied was tiny. Indeed, it was so tiny that many commentators have remarked that it seemed almost inconceivable that he could produce such a massive body of work – much of it monumental sculpture – in that confined space. Needless to say, much got broken.

Emile Savery photographed Giacometti there in 1946 and he is sitting on a stool enveloped in a greatcoat and modelling a plaster bust. One of his fragile standing figures is set, along with another bust, on the narrow worktable. It seems almost too cramped for him to execute even a small sculpture successfully and yet, out of this workshop, dozens and dozens of sculptures emerged, to be cast in

9 Rubin [1984], p. 267



Geoff Lowe.
Internal Glossary QED, 1972.



John R. Neeson.
Plate 2, 2007.

John R. Neeson.
Plate 3, 2007.

bronze by his brother Diego. In another unidentified photograph published in the *Sydney Morning Herald* in 2006, the artist and his wife, Annette, who is posing for him, can be seen from a bird's eye view. The studio is littered with debris and plaster; the work bench is literally unworkable because of the detritus that has been left on its top; sculptures are butted up to one another; and next to his wife is a plaster sculpture – taller than her – of one of the monumental standing figures for which Giacometti had become renowned.

The stick-thin and sometimes wafer-thin figures of the post-war period exude a profound sense of fragility and contingency, a condition that had begun to emerge in his work around 1940.¹⁰ Jean-Paul Sartre described Giacometti's sculptures as having "the ineffable grace of seeming perishable". Although it might be stretching too long a bow to suggest that the state of the studio and the limiting space that Giacometti had created in it profoundly influenced the form and the content of the sculptures, it's difficult not to imagine that the perilous life of these works – always in danger of being tripped over, knocked down, broken – becomes a very terrific metaphor for one aspect of their meaning - their vulnerability. Furthermore, the resilience of those sculptures that did survive might be a suitable metaphor for the humanity and dignity that Giacometti so avidly pursued in his later career.

In the works of Cezanne, Picasso and Braque discussed above, the studio's contents become the subject matter that is transformed into works of art through the act of painting or drawing. In Giacometti's case it is the condition of the studio itself that seems to affect the way in which the act of sculpting is pursued. What happens, though, when the very contents of the studio quite literally become the stuff of the work of art? It happened in the early collages of Picasso and Braque and even more so when Picasso produced *Still Life* [1914, Painted wood and upholstery object. Tate Gallery], a relief painting in which a highly decorative upholstery edging forms a key element in the work itself. Here material from the real world gives the painting a new kind of realism and the relief painting is able to oscillate between the real and its representations. It happened, too, when Picasso gathered up the handlebars and metal seat of bicycle and almost magically transformed the material into a representation of a bull [*Tête de taureau*, 1942, steel, 42 x 41 x 15].

Nowhere was this better exemplified than in a 'painting' titled *Bed* created by the American artist, Robert Rauschenberg in 1955. [*Bed* 1955, Combine painting: oil and pencil on pillow, quilt and sheet on wooden supports, 192.4 x 80 x 20.3. Museum of Modern Art, New York]. James Leggio describes in a matter-of-fact way how this work came about:

There is little doubt about the simple facts ... ; the tale of how Rauschenberg came to paint *Bed* has been recounted many times. He

10 Hohl, Reinhold *Giacometti: Sculpture, Painting, Drawing* London, Thames and Hudson, 1972, p.275

awoke one morning and found himself without materials on which to paint. As he looked about, his eye was drawn to a quilt that had been given to him a while before by a fellow student at Black Mountain College, Dorothea Rockburne. At first he stapled it to a stretcher and applied paint to the patchwork, trying to “turn the quilt pattern into an abstraction,” but that did not seem to work. Then he added at the top a pillow and part of a sheet, which seemed better; instead of just a quilt, it now became a bed, and the white of the sheet and pillow gave him a fresh surface to paint on. Finally, up it went on the wall.¹¹

As Leggio goes on to say, *Bed* caused immediate consternation (as it continues to do) and raised significant questions about the nature of artistic intention and the viewer’s perception. On the one hand, numerous commentators have discussed the work as if it was the representation of a horrific murder scene while Rauschenberg has consistently rejected this reading, describing it ‘as one of the friendliest paintings I’ve ever painted.’¹² It is, nevertheless, a confronting painting whether treated at the symbolic or the formal level. For the purposes of the present essay, it is worth noting that it is another example of an artist transforming materials found in the studio into (in this case) a combine painting; it’s at once a painted ‘bed’, a paint bed, and a painting of a bed depending on whether one reads it literally, formally or symbolically.¹³ James Leggio argues that this is an example of the way in which “Rauschenberg operates in the famous gap between the category known as Art and the category known as Life,”¹⁴ in a gap that is quintessentially played out in the artist’s studio.

The working method of Cezanne was invoked at the start of this essay because, probably more than any other artist of the nineteenth century, the objects of the workplace were the stuff of so many of his pictures: mundane subject matter, yet, but transformed into works of art, often of incomparable beauty. Studying many of them, one becomes acutely aware of the intensity of his scrutiny, the acuity of his vision and the sheer intellectual force that he brings to bear upon the act of painting. The same can be said of the other protagonists and their works of art discussed so far. They provide us with great exemplars of the nature of studio practice and of what artists do with their materials – what they see and how they see.

FULL FRONTAL – the present exhibition – takes this as its subject matter and explores the work of a group of Australian artists whose practice is also dominated by the stuff of the workplace. And it takes as its cue the work of one

11 James Leggio ‘Robert Rauschenberg’s *Bed* and the Symbolism of the Body,’ in *Studies in Modern Art: Essays on Assemblage* [edited by John Elderfield], New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1992, pp.79-80

12 Leggio [1992], p.81

13 Arthur Danto discusses this at considerable length in the essay ‘The Artworld in *Culture and Art: An Anthology* [edited by Lars Aagaard-Mogensen], Nyborg: F.Lokke, 1976, pp 9-20

14 Leggio [1992], p.108



Jacky Redgate.
STRAIGHTCUT #21, 2005-6.



John Nixon.
Orange monochrome (with white circle), 2001.

artist, Dale Hickey, whose paintings in recent years have been dominated by his own intense scrutiny of his studio. Chris McAuliffe, in a short essay for the Hickey catalogue, *Dale Hickey: New Paintings* [2005] remarks that “there’s an almost ceremonial sense of entry in these paintings” and he goes on to say:

They open onto a contrived space; what used to be called the ‘Albertian’ window’, in homage to perspectival constructions of the Renaissance. It’s easy to step into their shallow, stage-like fields; almost a reflex action. These paintings welcome you in, but leave you hanging. The point of view granted the visitor is an eerily high one; you hover over the floor, in the space of the painting but not exactly part of it. You wait for some action to commence but none eventuates; each scene is an unending pregnant pause, reminiscent of the ornate formality of Dutch still life.¹⁵

The three works by Dale Hickey in this exhibition depict the objects of the studio pretty well square on. In *Yellow* [from the *Void and other Symbol* series, 1993], for instance, a monochrome abstract painting is represented leaning against a wall. Its reference might be a Kasimir Malevich *White on White* painting – two abstract squares, one sitting on top of the other – but in this case the field on which the yellow square sits is modelled so that the painting appears to cast a shadow onto the wall behind. There is no foreshortening, just the use of tonal illusion to imply that the painting sits at an angle.

In *Untitled* [from the *Studio* series] it’s as if we are invited to look into the artist’s studio space but everything in the picture is arranged to suggest that the doorway is as far as the spectator will ever get. The centre of the painting is dominated by a geometric painting sitting upright on an easel; behind that a workbench fills the workspace edge to edge; it is also parallel to the picture plane. The pitch black studio wall can be seen between the legs of the bench and on either side of the easel; a second abstract painting hangs on the wall while, to the right, the panes of a darkened window can be discerned, replicating the geometric abstraction of these paintings and another one that leans against the bottom left hand corner of the easel; and a solid stool fills the foreground space to the right of the easel. How similar it seems to Giacometti’s workplace! No room to move! Except that this is an almost completely pristine space marred only by a fallen beaker and a glob of paint beside a tube of oil paint on top of the stool.

It’s a very smart picture – space is implied in a planar sense because we read things as being in front or behind other things in the studio and because cylindrical objects such as the polystyrene cup and a pitcher on the bench are modelled tonally. But virtually everything is full frontal, in your face and on the surface. There’s nowhere to go. Robert Nelson wrote that in this series of paintings ‘when something leans on an angle, like a brush or a mahlstick, it

15 Chris McAuliffe *Dale Hickey: New Paintings* (20 July–13 August, 2005) Melbourne: John Buckley Gallery, 2005, unpaginated

looks transgressive,' and this is quite true.¹⁶ It is what gives these paintings their disconcerting and uncanny edginess. Hickey's studio may be a haven but it has its demons too.

Chris McAuliffe conjured up the image of the 'Albertian window' to describe the spectator's experience of Hickey's paintings;¹⁷ the viewer is invited to imagine that what is seen within the picture frame is a window. Leon Battista Alberti suggested this in his book *On Painting* published in 1435 and, for the first time, the theory of single point perspective was made available in a printed document. It immediately found favour throughout Italy and was one of the principal drivers of the extraordinary advances made in illusionist representation in Italy in the latter part of the fourteenth century. Paolo Uccello's *The Battle of San Romano* [c.1454-57, Tempera on wood, 181.6 x 320 cm. National Gallery, London] is a particularly engaging example of Alberti's theory put into practice. This panel depicts part of a battle fought between Florence and Siena in 1432 in which Niccolò da Mauruzi da Tolentino is the central figure on his rearing white charger. Although ostensibly he is the heroic subject, the real star of the show is perspective, with dead soldiers, lances, swords and other military accoutrements all neatly arranged along the invisible orthogonal lines that meet at a single vanishing point in the centre of the painting.

Geoff Lowe takes up Uccello's discoveries in a witty and affectionate way in his *Internal Glossary*. QED 1972, in which the entire contents of his large and cluttered studio are marshalled along the imaginary orthogonal lines that run to two separate vanishing points on the far wall of the studio. This is the place where Lowe does battle with art - rulers, stretchers, work tables, boxes and canvases all line up in dutiful serried ranks, as the spectator views the scene from a relatively high vantage point. In the painting the eyes focus on one point and then, abruptly, are moved to focus on another and, even though the painting has a taut and geometrical architecture, the contingent nature of vision is brought sharply to the forefront through this device. It is similar to Cezanne's method in this regard.

Like Lowe, John R. Neeson has been an avid student of Italian art, more recently becoming interested in Spanish still life painting. Works from the latter part of the 1980s (especially after his return from a residency in Tuscany in 1984) include several monumental paintings and drawings that place the viewer in an imagined studio space. The cue for this is a table upon which sit a cylinder, sphere and cone. An elaborate heavy curtain forms a corner backdrop and seems to have been drawn aside to reveal the main scene of these works - a dramatic, cloud-laden sky. Tiepolo comes to mind as a source for these large works and, like Dale Hickey's paintings, they seem to oscillate between the real and artifice.

16 Robert Nelson "Dale Hickey," *The Age*, 3rd August, 2005

17 See Leon Battista Alberti *On Painting* [translated and edited by John R. Spencer], New Haven: Yale University Press, 1966



Trudi Brinckman.
Red Cross, 2006 (Detail).



John Barbour.
Hard Times/Killing Floor, 2005-7.

In Neeson's case the skies are created from natural observations made from his studio in Hobart at the time but these are played off against the geometric objects and the deliberate theatricality that pervades the works.

Recently Neeson exhibited *Small Stills* – a series of long and narrow still lifes – at Dianne Tanzer Gallery in Melbourne [August, 2006] and a painting from this series is included in FULL FRONTAL. The painting depicts a relatively wide and shallow porcelain platter that is painted to the very edge of canvas. Whereas the statuette in Cezanne's *Still Life with Plaster Cast* seems to act like a sponge sucking the colour onto its surface, Neeson's porcelain platter acts as a mirror that, under the artist's intense scrutiny, gives back a fleeting and contingent reflection of the studio in which it has been painted. Two larger works, painted more recently, continue this exploration of the studio space in a similar manner.

On several occasions in this essay, reference has been made to the ways in which the actual stuff of the workplace finds its way into the art works and John Nixon, Trudi Brinckman and John Barbour are exemplars in this regard. Ashley Crawford, when reviewing John Nixon's *Experimental Painting Workshop 2004* at the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, recounted visiting Nixon's independent gallery, Art Projects, in Lonsdale St, Melbourne in the early 1980s.

His studio behind the gallery [he wrote] was crowded with a variety of objects – canvasses, boards, bottles and constructions – all labelled with his obsessive exploration of the minimalist cross, in part a homage to the Russian constructivist Kasimir Malevich.¹⁸

Crawford went on to describe the ACCA show which included a 'magnificent melange of paintings and objects – 102 of them – that occasionally bear the detritus of his travels, with coins and beer-bottle-tops from Europe ...' At the conclusion, Crawford describes Nixon as a 'natural-born scavenger' where 'the hardware store and the dumpster are equal sources for the materials of his work.'¹⁹ These tough and uncompromising paintings serve on one level to underline the labour involved in art practice – this is why the tools of the artist, the mallet, the paint roller and the tenon saw quite literally find their way onto canvases. And on another level, nothing is so insignificant that it cannot be the object of the artist's gaze. So, like Kurt Schwitters in the 1930s, Nixon will append discarded objects to the painted surface as a heroic affirmation of the nexus between art and life.

Trudi Brinckman's recent exhibition with Ben Booth at CAST gallery, *Conduct*, also employs impoverished material – the stuff of the everyday – that one might find lying around the stripped out and abandoned urban buildings that often become the cheap rental space for artists. Trudi Brinckman utilises the found materials of those kinds of spaces – the metres upon metres of abandoned electric wiring, power boards, conduits, internet cables, telephone cords and

18 Ashley Crawford Nixon's *bright orange blossoms*, *The Age* 19th June, 2004

19 Crawford [2004]

other materials that service the communications, networks and energy needs of busy commercial offices. Like Nixon, Brinckman is a scavenger and in her case she is fascinated with energy flows and how one might find sculptural solutions to represent them. In some works she creates quite literal solutions such as a bare illuminating electric light suspended just above a humble double power point placed on the gallery floor. The bulb illuminates the power source - it's in the limelight, so to speak. In other works, Brinckman brings her craft skills to bear on the materials – weaving metres of cable, for instance, into a relief work which, in its dense patterning, can stand for energy flow itself; or drawing the image of an electric turbine directly into the wall with a router so that the art work is embedded in surface. These are strategies that give the works an unrefined immediacy and real presence.

John Barbour also employs lowly and obdurate materials in his installations: lead, aluminium, stained fabrics, scrunched up thread, paper cut-outs, cardboard and polystyrene. In 2001, for example, Barbour's exhibition, *Notes for Private Monuments* at the Yuill Crowley Gallery, Sydney, included utterly base objects probably scavenged from the stairwell leading up to the inner city gallery or the cul de sac nearby: a single cigarette, chewing gum, a couple of Panadol tablets are gathered up and placed singly on small, low-slung plinths made out of cardboard. This is sculpture of the abject, where one has to get down on one's knees to scrutinise the work of art. Even when Barbour goes to the wall he employs equally impoverished materials. Stained voile that looks like it might have been suffused with urine or semen or vomit hangs forlornly on the gallery wall as is the case with *B 4 No Man* [2003, ink and acrylic thread on cotton voile. Art Gallery of South Australia]. The text, 'B 4 No Man' is stitched crudely onto the voile in a cack-handed gesture of deprecation. Similarly the word 'Joy' finds its way onto another piece of stained voile in what is, in fact, a joyless gesture of bad sewing.

In a revealing essay for Barbour's 2006 show *Tribute: A Bibliography for Bees* at the Contemporary Art Centre of South Australia, the author Russell Smith argued that there is, in fact, considerable humour in this art of almost indescribable baseness. 'I think it would be a mistake,' he writes, to 'take the weakness and plaintiveness of these embroidered texts at face value. Because just as their dominant physical quality is lightness, so too their dominant rhetorical tone is gently ironic.'²⁰

Nixon, Brinckman and Barbour have all devised strategies to mix real world objects into the production of their art with varying degrees of transformation occurring. Some works, nevertheless, include objects that are so obdurate that no amount of cajoling will lift them above what they are and certainly, in the case of Barbour, this is precisely the intention. For Barbour, the studio is the place to

20 Russell Smith *Tribute: A Bibliography for Bees* Adelaide: Contemporary Art Centre of South Australia, 2006, p.5

interrogate art and to test its fortitude in the face of the real, and sometimes the messiness of reality wins.

If these artists create works that remind the spectator of the investigation begun in synthetic cubism and pursued by the dadaists and constructivists, Jacky Redgate's rigorous analysis of objects, especially their form and colour, has greater affinity with the project that Cezanne set himself when he walked into his workplace everyday. I think Ross Gibson affirms this when he writes:

Redgate's productions are subtle inquests into what can be perceived, known and communicated. Her work hums away with a few simple but vital queries. What systems of perception and what materials of rendition do we have at our disposal and what are their capacities and incapacities? How do these systems and materials promote and impede our comprehensions of our worlds? And how can we venture into unaccustomed combinations of these systems and materials in order to strengthen our capacities for perceiving, comprehending and communicating whilst all the time being aware that each new combination also sets new limits on thought and feeling?²¹

FULL FRONTAL has six of her scintillating type C photographs from the series *Straight Cut* commenced in 2001 and continuing through 2006. The subject is the nature of perception - how we see; the subject matter is gaily coloured plastic containers. Early on these were white and orange; later a range of other containers with brightly hued colours including blue, green and red were introduced. The containers are placed in an intensely lit white space and, with the use of mirrors, Redgate is able to set up tableaux that confound the eye and test our perception as the objects are doubled, elongated, and seen in reverse in a perplexing range of different combinations. It is often impossible to tell what is object and what is reflection because the alignment of the objects against the mirrors and against the backdrop is so immaculate and seamless. Sometimes the distortions seem quite improbable, almost like the impossible distortions that Ingres played with in some of his portraits of women in which a mirror is employed to depict the back of the sitter. At other times one is taken by surprise by the space that is opened up through the agency of photography and the manner in which form flattens, stacks and repeats. They are big works – over a metre wide – and so these still lifes have a monumentality about them that makes them visually compelling and exciting to look at. As with the still lifes of Cezanne, Picasso and Braque, and the porcelain bowls of John R. Neeson, and the easels and canvases of Dale Hickey, in Jacky Redgate's still lifes we get a strong sense of the studio as a kind of laboratory, a place of experimentation, a place that shows us how to see.

Jonathan Holmes
August 2007

21 Ross Gibson 'The Colour Clavecin: On Jacky Redgate', *Photofile*, No. 38, March 1993, p.10

FULL FRONTAL: ARTIST BIOGRAPHIES

BIOGRAPHY. TRUDI BRINCKMAN.

Trudi Brinckman was born in Hobart in 1972. She first exhibited solo as part of Living Artists Week in 2003 and has been included in Nomadic Detritus, Mooresbuilding Contemporary Art Space, Fremantle (2004); Acidophilus, Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery, Hobart (2005); and Conduct (with Ben Booth), CAST Gallery, Hobart (2006).

BIOGRAPHY. JOHN BARBOUR.

John Barbour was born in The Hague, Netherlands in 1954 and lives in Adelaide. He first exhibited solo at First Draft in Sydney in 1987, and has exhibited regularly with Yuill/Crowley Gallery, Sydney since 1988. He has also had several solo shows at the Contemporary Art Centre of South Australia and the Experimental Art Foundation, Adelaide. He has also regularly exhibited through independent artist-run spaces such as Store 5, Apartment, and CBD.

His work was included in the Fifth Australian Sculpture Triennial, Melbourne (1993), Australian Perspecta, Art Gallery of New South Wales (1995), XXVI Bienal de Sao Paulo, Brazil (2002), 2004: Australian Culture Now National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, Public/Private, Tumataniui/Tumataiti, II Auckland International Triennial (2004), and Interesting Times, Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney (2005).

Full biographical details: <http://people.unisa.edu.au/John.Barbour>
The artist is represented by Yuill/Crowley Gallery, Sydney

BIOGRAPHY. DALE HICKEY.

Dale Hickey was born in Melbourne in 1937. He first exhibited solo at Toorak Galleries, Melbourne in 1964. He has exhibited regularly in Melbourne, Sydney and Adelaide, most recently at John Buckley Fine Art (1999, 2003 & 2005).

A retrospective exhibition of his work was mounted by Ballarat Fine Art Gallery and toured to Monash University Gallery, Melbourne; Manly City Art Gallery, Sydney and the Museum of Contemporary Art, Brisbane (1988-9).

His work was included in The Field, National Gallery of Victoria and Art Gallery of New South Wales (1968), Minimal Art, NGV (1976); Illusion and Reality, National Gallery of Australia, AGWA, QAG, AGNSW, AGSA, NGV, TMAG (1977); Australian Perspecta, AGNSW (1981). The field now, Heide Park and Art Gallery, Melbourne (1984), Good Vibrations, Heide Museum of Modern Art (2002); and Fieldwork: Australian Art 1968 – 2002, NGV, (2002).

Full biographical details at www.johnbuckley.com.au

The artist is represented by John Buckley Gallery, Melbourne

BIOGRAPHY. GEOFF LOWE.

Geoff Lowe was born in 1952 and lives in Melbourne and Turin. He first exhibited at Powell Street Gallery in 1975. He exhibited regularly at Powell Street Gallery through to the late eighties and continues to exhibit with Roslyn Oxley9. His work was included in The Politics of Picturing, Tasmanian School of Art Gallery, Hobart (1984); Australian Perspecta, AGNSW (1985); How Much Beauty Can I Stand, ACCA Melbourne (1986); History, IMA Brisbane (1988); Out of Asia, Heide Park and Art Gallery, Melbourne (1990); Correspondences, QAG, Brisbane (1991).

A survey exhibition Collaborations 1980-92 was mounted by ACCA, Melbourne in 1992 focusing on a series of collaborations/partnerships up to that time, and since 1993 Geoff Lowe has worked exclusively with Jacqueline Riva as A Constructed World. Their work has been include in Sao Paulo Bienal (1998); Clemenger Contemporary Art Award. MOMA at Heide (1999); Tirana Biennale (2003) and was the subject of a major survey A Constructed World – Increase Your Uncertainty at ACCA, Melbourne (2007). They have participated in numerous events, performances and publishing projects.

Full biographical details at www.roslynoxley9.com.au / www.uplandsgallery.com

A Constructed World is represented by Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Sydney and Uplands Gallery, Melbourne

BIOGRAPHY. JOHN R. NEESON.

John Neeson was born in 1946 and lives in Melbourne. He first exhibited solo at Pinacotheca in 1973. He exhibited regularly at Pinacotheca during the seventies and eighties and since then at various other commercial galleries in Melbourne, Brisbane and Sydney. Starting in 1993, he has also completed 23 installations of venue specific paintings that reference the changes of light and passage of time within buildings in Melbourne, Benalla, Brisbane, Hobart, London, Lisbon, and the Province of Pisa.

He curated Arrangement-Australian Still Life 1973-93 for Heide Museum of Modern Art, Melbourne (1993)

His work was included in The Seventies, National Gallery of Victoria (1982); Inherited Absolute, Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Melbourne (1992); Rediscovery – Australian artists in Europe 1982-92, Seville World Fair (1992); Good Vibrations, Heide Museum of Modern Art, Melbourne (2002); and Snap Freeze: Still Life Now, Tarrawarra Museum of Art, Victoria (2007)

Full biographical details: www.diannetanzergallery.net.au

The artist is represented by Dianne Tanzer Gallery, Melbourne

BIOGRAPHY. JOHN NIXON.

John Nixon was born in Sydney in 1949 and lives at Briar Hill in Melbourne. He first exhibited solo at Pinacotheca, Melbourne in 1973. He has exhibited regularly at Anna Schwartz Gallery, Melbourne; Sarah Cottier Gallery, Sydney; Goddard de Fiddes Gallery, Perth; Sue Crockford Gallery, Auckland; Hamish McKay Gallery, Wellington; and Galerie Mark Muller, Zurich.

His work was included in Documenta 7, Kassel, Germany in 1982.

Since 2000, he has held large scale solo exhibitions surveying aspects of his work from 1968 – 2005 at the Kunstmuseum Singen, Germany; Kunstmuseum Baselland, Basle; Stiftung fur Konkrete Kunst, Reutlingen, Germany; Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Melbourne; The Art Gallery of Western Australia, Perth; and Tarrawarra Museum of Art, Victoria.

Full biographical details: www.annaschwartzgallery.com

The artist is represented by Anna Schwartz Gallery, Melbourne

BIOGRAPHY. JACKY REDGATE.

Jacky Redgate was born in London in 1955, emigrated to Australia in 1967 and lives in Sydney. She first exhibited solo in 1978 at the SA School of Art Gallery, Adelaide. Her recent survey exhibition Jacky Redgate: Survey 1980-2003 and monograph publication was initiated by the Contemporary Art Centre of SA and toured to Perth Institute of Contemporary Arts (2005); and Jacky Redgate: Life of the System 1980-2005, MCA, Sydney incorporated new work and a curatorial project 1967: Selected works from the MCA Collection (2005-2006).

Her work was included in Australian Perspecta, AGNSW (1985), 6th Biennale of Sydney, AGNSW (1986), Australian Bicentennial Perspecta, AGNSW, AGWA and tour Germany (1987-89); 7th Biennale of Sydney, AGNSW, NGV (1988); Edge to Edge, National Museum of Art, Osaka and tour Japan (1988-89); 8th Biennale of Sydney, AGNSW (1990); Looking at Seeing and Reading, IDG, IMA, Monash University Gallery (1993-94) Photography is Dead! Long Live Photography, MCA, Sydney (1996); 2006 Adelaide Biennial of Australian Art, AGSA, Adelaide; 2006 Clemenger Contemporary art Award, NGV, Melbourne; and Snap Freeze: Still Life Now, Tarrawarra Museum of Art, Victoria (2007).

Full biographical details: www.shermangalleries.com.au / www.arc1gallery.com
The artist is represented by Sherman Galleries, Sydney and Arc One Gallery, Melbourne

FULL FRONTAL: CATALOGUE OF WORKS

WORKS. TRUDI BRINCKMAN.

Redundant Void 2006
General power outlets, acrylic paint and silver sealing tape
213 cm diameter

*Red Cross 2006
Electrical cable
300 x 300 x 4 cm

Courtesy the artist

WORKS. JOHN BARBOUR.

*Hard Times/Killing Floor 2005-7
Aluminium, lead, silk chiffon, inks
Variable installation dimensions

Courtesy the artist and Yuill/Crowley Gallery, Sydney

WORKS. DALE HICKEY.

*Untitled (from the Trestle series), 1986
Oil and enamel on canvas
182 x 182 cm

Untitled (from the Studio series) 2005
Oil and enamel on canvas
198 x 168 cm

Yellow (from the Void and other symbols series), 1993
Oil and enamel on canvas
183 x 183 cm

Private Collections, Melbourne

WORKS. GEOFF LOWE.

*Internal Glossary QED, 1972
Acrylic on canvas
183 x 244 cm
University of Tasmania Collection

WORKS. JOHN R. NEESON.

Small still 3 2006
Oil on canvas on board
10 x 56 cm
Private collection, Hobart

Bowl 2005
Oil on board
43 x 120 cm

*Plate 2 2007
Oil on canvas
30 x 180 cm

*Plate 3 2007
Oil on canvas
40 x 200 cm

Courtesy the artist and Dianne Tanzer Gallery, Melbourne

WORKS. JOHN NIXON.

*Orange monochrome (with white circle) 2001
Enamel and mixed materials and objects on canvas board
61 x 76 cm

Orange monochrome (with Mallet A) 1996
Enamel and Mallet on chipboard and mdf
61 x 90 cm
(illustrated)

Orange monochrome (with white rectangle) 2001
Enamel on plywood on mdf
61 x 90 cm

Orange monochrome 2000
Enamel on plywood and Perspex with mixed materials on mdf
60 x 60 cm

Orange monochrome (with black triangle and orange saucepan) 2001
Enamel on masonite and saucepan on mdf
61 x 61 cm

Orange monochrome (with Roller) 2000
Enamel and lambswool roller on plywood
25.5 x 20.5 cm

Untitled Konstruktion 1994
Enamel and metal circle and tenon saw on masonite
61 x 45.5 cm

Courtesy the artist and Anna Schwartz Gallery, Melbourne

WORKS. JACKY REDGATE.

*STRAIGHTCUT #21 2005-6

type-C photograph

96 x 115 cm

Edition 5

STRAIGHTCUT #22 2005-6

type-C photograph

96 x 115 cm

Edition 5

STRAIGHTCUT #23 2006

type-C photograph

96 x 115 cm

Edition 5

STRAIGHTCUT #24 2006

type-C photograph

96 x 115 cm

Edition 5

STRAIGHTCUT #26 2006

type-C photograph

96 x 115 cm

Edition 5

STRAIGHTCUT #27 2006

type-C photograph

96 x 115 cm

Edition 5

Courtesy the artist and Sherman Galleries,
Sydney and Arc One Gallery, Melbourne

FULL FRONTAL: ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The curator wishes to thank the participating artists for their support and co-operation in providing works and images, the private collectors in Melbourne for lending the Hickey works; Rachel Rose for facilitating the work from the University Collection; Jonathan Holmes for his catalogue essay; Pat Brassington, co-ordinator of the Plimsoll Gallery exhibition program for her on-going contribution and dedication; and Margaret Woodward, Neal Haslem, James Newitt and GAP Studio for their continued involvement in the program.

Authors: Jonathan Holmes & Paul Zika

Catalogue Design: April Krause and Dominic Whittle

Printing: Focal Printing

Photography: The artists and Simon Strong (Hickey),

Simon Cuthbert (Lowe), and Danny Lacy (Nixon)

Exhibition dates: August 24 – September 14 2007

Plimsoll Gallery, Tasmanian School of Art, Centre for the Arts,
Hunter Street, Hobart

ISBN

© 2007 the authors, artists and the University of Tasmania

The University of Tasmania's exhibition program receives generous assistance from the Minister for the Arts, through Arts Tasmania.

