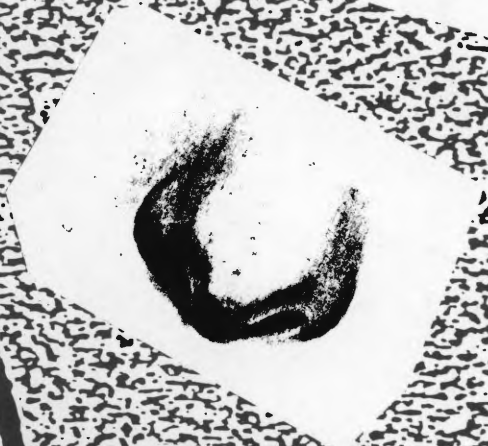


N575



**THE  
ID  
SHOW**

**THE  
ID  
SHOW**



N567



**F509**



**F510**



**F511**

## **THE ID SHOW**

Richard Dunn

Lindy Lee

William Robinson

Geoff Weary

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## INTRODUCTION

The I D Show has been conceived as a vehicle capable of making a modest contribution to the ongoing debate about Australian cultural identity. This confabulation is not seen as having any definite outcome: more like a streamer of flypaper, which wafts around in the prevailing breezes with passing bits and pieces adhering to its tacky-tacky. Sometime in the distant future the debate will wind down and perhaps then, in those twilight hours of the Commonwealth, what and where we are, will be known to us with an insight born of retrospectivity. In the meantime, the processes of conjecture, speculation and identification, even if a little simplistic, can provide an important questioning of the displacement of cultural identity by internationalism - political, economic and social which bowls us along arse over bush turkey. At the same time, this scrutiny must bite deeper than nostalgic huff and puff about Vegemite and FJ Holdens.

The enigmatic, and perhaps oracular nature of this allusive venture has influenced the mechanism for staging the I D Show. Four curator-writers have each been asked to select from the oeuvre of one artist, work which addresses some aspect of the identity polemic. Further, each curator-writer has produced a catalogue essay discussing the artworks and the ideas which have determined their choice.

The I D Show then, is a series of partnerships, each of which establishes a conjunction of ideas and images articulated through both the exhibition and the catalogue.

Geoff Parr  
July, 1987

## THE IDENTITY OF HISTORY by Rob Horne

Reference: UNTITLED (HISTORICAL TROPES) AND UNTITLED (ART AND FEAR), 1986, artist Richard Dunn.

*In seventeen hundred and eighty eight peculiar beings the colour of dead people emerged from the belly of an enormous fish; and as they reached the unwelcoming shore they immediately began making up stories about themselves...*

### I - TRUE FICTIONS -

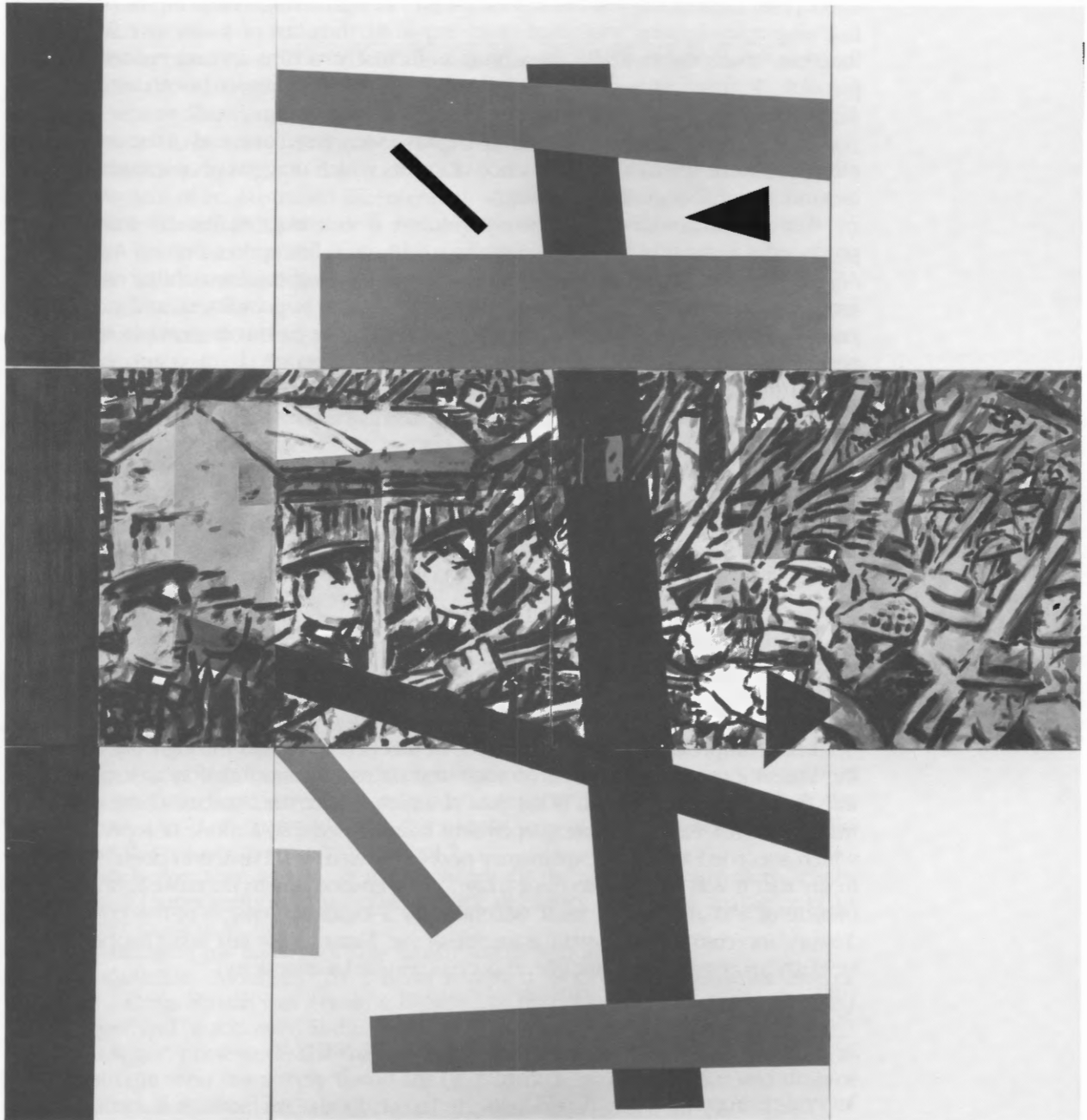
'History, which may be called *just* and *perfect* history, is of three kinds, according to the object which it propoundeth or pretendeth to represent: for it either representeth a *time*, or a *person*, or an *action*.'

Thus Sir Francis Bacon in his *Advancement of Learning* characterised the fields of study proper to history. In this he was opposing 'pre-modern' historiography – which basically saw history as being an allegory shadowing forth the eternal purpose of God; but he was doing much more, for he was equally situating the discipline as a mode of practice. Bacon's 'three kinds' are formulated as a transposition of the Aristotelian unities (of time, place and action) from the field of dramatic composition into the human sciences.

Throughout the Renaissance a conventional contrast was made between the discourses of history and poetry; history was generally felt to be of an inferior kind, being a mere recital of things that had actually happened, whereas (as Aristotle had pointed out<sup>2</sup>) poetry speculated on what *could* happen. Poetry in effect held the 'superior truth' of prophecy. Bacon's transposition is indicative of a widespread change in perspective which reversed the terms of this conventional ranking. But the prospectur cited above is doing much more than simply witnessing a shift in the terms of epistemology; that transposition makes it clear that, from now on, 'history' will have the same *kind* of persuasive force that 'poetry' had been accorded. History, to be precise, is no longer to be pursued as a mere presentation of facts; history is redefined as a form of *fiction* ('representation'), as the construction of a narrative which will articulate the facts of which the past is made up.

Let's examine a little further this notion of history as a kind of true fiction, as a narrative, and what that might imply regarding the representation of its object. The distinguishing feature of a narrative as opposed to, say, a catalogue or an allegory is that it mobilises the incidents of its discourse in a particular way: it produces a very powerful linear momentum. And of course once 'history' is conceived not as a kind of charting of accidents but as the ordering and representation of facts in a sequential structure it requires only a very small step to attribute that momentum, that sequentiality, to the facts themselves rather than to the mode of articulating them.

In the long development by which the afterglow of the Renaissance mode of



*Untitled (Historical Tropes)*, 1986 Richard Dunn

conceptual organisation mutated into the fully-fledged Enlightenment, the practice of historiography was reconstituted quite explicitly in terms of a narrative function, a function which came to be seen both as formal structure and an epistemological principle. Voltaire exemplifies this process perfectly. In a history book written in the 1740s for his friend Mme. du Chatelet he made the following remark:

'In the flood of revolutions which we have seen, from one end of the universe to the other, there seems a fatal sequence of events which dragged people into them just as winds move the sands and waves.'<sup>3</sup>

The particular kind of account Voltaire is constructing has by that process produced a version of history which we might say relies upon a certain *logic of the object*; 'history' has become a 'fatal sequence' possessing the inevitability of a natural force. A sequentiality of the historical process itself is postulated, and justified in practice by the sequentiality of the historical discourse (a classic example of the self-confirming system). Voltaire's work - which, like Bacon's, I am using only symptomatically - makes it plain that there is a Substantial logic of history, an order of reasons of the object. What we are looking at, then, is a historicist Idealism which has been both established and justified by a particular kind of historical discourse: there is a *logic of history* which is not *in history*.

That conception of history reached its culmination - from which in many ways we have never recovered - with Hegel. For Hegel the truth of metaphysics and the meaning of the world is located in the unfolding of the human Spirit in history. 'History' becomes the natural law of the realisation of the Ideal, and writing history is an analogy for writing Truth:

'Until Spirit has completed itself *in itself*, until it has completed itself as world-spirit, it cannot reach its consummation as *self-conscious* Spirit ... The movement of carrying forward the form of its self-knowledge is the labour which it accomplishes as actual history.'<sup>4</sup>

I have impressionistically indicated, in this headlong skid through the centuries, the line along which 'history' reconstituted its nature and function as it developed into the modern conception of the past of which we are the legatees. There were two major changes. Firstly, historiography was transformed into a mode of representation which accorded itself the explanatory power previously accorded to poetry, which is to say that it was constructed as a *true fiction*, embodying in narrative form a reality outside of and anterior to itself. Secondly, by a logical extension of this conception, 'history' increasingly assumed the mantle of the 'Natural': not just 'what happened' but virtually an ontological principle, at once origin and authenticity.

## II

### - OF THE LUCKY COUNTRY -

The history of White Australia is the history of the narratives it has constructed about itself. At first these narratives were about loss and lack, precisely the absence of an 'identity'. Around the end of the nineteenth century (and lets not forget that

'Australia' didn't even exist, except as a geographer's convenience, until 1901) this perspective was stood on its head, the disturbing Otherness of Australia was valorised as a positive separateness. The official narratives are now about plenitude and prophecy: about the discovery of an identity. The historical record has been reconstructed as an almost Hegelian account of the progressive self-realisation of Being. 'Australia' subsists in its own historical narrative as the origin and authenticity which Hegel attributed to Spirit.

The project of an Australian Bicentennial, which is a major spur for this present publication and exhibition, is a clear and explicit attempt to unveil this mystery, to discover, to get in touch with, that origin and that authenticity. The Australian Identity is in fact to be established and triumphalised by being constituted *as* history.

In this official mythology a particular history - of an undifferentiated 'Australia' - is postulated as a bounded text, a narrative commencing at a particular moment which all was formless and void. By the linear impetus inherent in the narrative structure the past two hundred years are thus cast as the progress of the object 'Australia' along a certain line of development, of its self-realisation as 'identity'. In effect the thing which the whole construct is supposed to be finding - 'an Australian identity'<sup>5</sup> - is actually presupposed as the fundamental ground of that construction.

Where this places us is in the realm of the 'always already there'. It would seem that the 'Australian identity' - because we can identify the bounded text of which it is object, because we can read its narrative in the rubric of history - is something pre-existent, something which we simply have to discover and realise. And this official mythology, the credo of the Bicentennial and its associated pomps, is simply a codification of the basic mythology constructed by conservative White Australia, its self-conception as transhistorical subject of a particular narrative of history. It is, for instance, no accident that the Landscape has played such a central role in the discourse of Australian identity. Right from the start the basic theme was articulated, as in Fred McCubbin's eulogy of Arthur Streeton's painting *The Purple Noon's Transparent Might*:

'This poem of light and heat ... brings home to us so forcibly such a sense of boundless pastures flecked with sheep and cattle, of the long rolling plains of the Never-Never, the bush-crowned hills, the purple seas of our continent. You could almost take this picture as a national Symbol.'<sup>6</sup>

The landscape, then as now, is the paradigm for the always already there, a Substance which (supposedly at least) exists outside of history and is thus guarantor of an essential, pre-existent identity.

The 'Australian' has had a precisely similar manifestation:

'The Canadian "Mounties" have been accepted as exhibiting authentic Digger attributes ... Caius Marius was a dinkim Digger ... In his outlook on life, St. Paul himself was a Digger; and he followed in the footsteps of a greater than he.'<sup>7</sup>

The 'Digger', presented schematically as the sum of all truly Australian virtues, is an eternal type who has simply found his (it is always 'his') true place and time of incarnation in Australia. The messages are parallel. As both origin and authenticity of its own historical narrative, 'Australia' is clearly not to be found *in* history; it is constituted from the start as *essence*, as Nature, as the transhistorical. And so with its

'identity', the essence of which exists outside of all history. Ultimately it is the function of history to unveil this already constituted identity.

The historical narrative of Australia is presented as manifesting progressively the contours of a timeless, but deferred, identity: history is promise; it is guarantee; it is prophecy. It is, in fact, almost anything but history. Established as the Coat of many Colours veiling but equally embodying an essential identity, history loses any differential force. History as identity in fact postulates an *identity of history* - which is to say that all historical moments are considered to be essentially exactly the same. The narrative which seeks to establish history as identity actually *negates* history itself.

'Lack of historical sense is the hereditary defect of all philosophers ... Many of them take man automatically as he has most recently been shaped ... But everything has become; there are neither eternal facts nor indeed eternal verities. Therefore what is needed from now on is historical philosophising, and with it the virtue of modesty.'<sup>8</sup>

### III - WHERE ALL IS ONE -

From a position almost amounting to that of official spokesman for conservative White Australia's cultural mythos, Sir Donald Horne makes a really significant suggestion in his manifesto *The Lucky Country*. He argues that the cultural riches of the past (read, in the Catholic sense, 'relics') are too concentrated in a small number of traditional centres, largely in Europe. These relics - the heritage of all the European derived nations - ought to be disseminated more widely: scattered broadcast across the western world, so all can have a share<sup>9</sup>.

This can almost stand as a paradigm for that notion of a Being outside of time and place to which the incidents of history merely bear witness in their varying ways. For Horne it is manifested as the relics of 'Culture' but at bottom this is entirely commensurate with an identity conceived as Nature. The whole point is that nothing necessarily belongs in any particular time and place; certainly nothing is historically specific. The narrative of history, shorn of any real distinctions, merely manifests the principle of an essential unity.

The homogenising of the narrative that is supposed to constitute 'history' produces an extremely powerful effect which can be described as one of smoothing and centring. All previous experience is mobilised in a linear progression towards the realisation of a transhistorically valid principle; and of course experience which does not fit - anomalies, contradictions in the historical line - is either rewritten as if it did or, when it is too refractory, is simply ignored and thus rendered invisible. 'History', purged of difference, becomes a tautologous guarantee of its own identity, and that of its official guardians. Because, make no mistake about it, this 'powerful effect' is precisely an *effect of power*. In the authorised version of Australian history all things are articulated in a codeless axiomatic which positively denies difference, renders it marginal when not actually heretical.

The effect of power, as Foucault rightly pointed out, is not to 'repress', 'conceal' or any of the usual left-liberal litaney: power is *productive*<sup>10</sup>. This is to say that power does not simply suppress pre-existent forms of experience, it demands the construction of a particular form of reality. In the case of 'identity and history' a triumphal

FIGURE 16

Salvator designs originated during the early 1900s. Theo van Doesburg and Piet Mondrian, House for an artist, 1923; Marcel Breuer, Armchair, 1925; M. Szwed and H. Przymbel, Adjustable table for one, aluminum shell, 1935.



extensions of our perceptual system to penetrate the mysteries of life: Teilhard de Chardin noted,

... has been most readily achieved in the visual and plastic approach, but this does not invalidate the

*Untitled (Art and Fear)*, 1986 Richard Dunn

narrative of essential unity is fabricated which compels assent by assuming the aura of the given, of a priori truth. Contradictory experience is not 'suppressed', it is erased: consigned to a limbo of the lost outside the discourse of knowledge. The two-hundred-year bounded text of Bicentennial history has produced its own object, its own prophecy, and its own power of truth.

#### IV

#### - TURN THE GAZE UPON ITSELF -

'Every historical event occurs twice: the first time as tragedy, the second as farce.'<sup>11</sup>

The dramatic narrative of Australian Identity, having appeared as tragedy (myths of loss and lack) and farce (celebratory rhetoric) has now gone into rep (ritual invocation)<sup>12</sup>.

The 'official narrative' is remarkable, of course, not merely for its power of denying historical difference but also of constructing a politic which - being timeless and thus changeless - has all the authority of Natural Truth. It is a politic of banality, based upon an incantatory triumphalism, but it is all the more forceful because of this virtual absence of content; it takes on the look of the common-sensical, the obvious.

Two hundred years - of what?

Two hundred years of a perpetual repetition of the same platitudinous story. Perhaps it is time to rethink this construct? Even time to wonder whose identity, and whose history, this is supposed to be?

One thinks of forty thousand years of past rendered dumb by this discourse. Of the female half of the population, absent and unidentifiable. Of historical differences.

My reading of Richard Dunn's two paintings 'Untitled: Historical Tropes' and 'Untitled: Art and Fear' is that they are questioning glances, interrogations of precisely this kind of construction of history as cosy, undifferentiated continuum. They refer, absolutely specifically, to certain moments in the past, the consideration of which raises uneasy questions and speculations. But first, what they are not.

There is a fairly common notion of a 'postmodern practice' based upon the arbitrary juxtaposition of images from disparate historical and cultural sites. This practice is conveniently called 'appropriation', and as a strategy in itself it seems to me to correspond exactly to that view of history exemplified in Sir Donald Horne's suggestion for a global museum and in the notion of the Australian Identity subsisting outside of time and place: that is, to the view of history which attempts to deny its nature as history, as difference, real change, specific and contexted moments. In this all contact with meaning is lost and the only meaning possible is that arbitrarily set for us: which in the end will always turn into, or turn out to be, the official Truth of power.

The two images in 'Historical Tropes', in sharp contradistinction from this tendency, are precise. Horizontally a recreation of a newspaper image of a street battle being fought in Meryvale street, Brisbane, 1919. It is cut by the vertical use of a Malevich painting from the immediately pre-revolutionary years. A whole excised history in western society and western visual practice is being tangentially indicated here: a history of the passion invested in radical activity, a history of the desire which saw its only possible task as being to demolish the old world and build a new. This sort of thinking is a bit of a joke now, because the received wisdom is that such dreams are impracticable, and the whole history of the practice which sought to expose and destroy bourgeois society has been silenced by the power of official truth, by the celebratory and a historical view of 'the past' indicated earlier.

'Art and Fear', in which art's complicity with the construction of modern forms of management is suggested by the juxtaposition of the Pittsburg International Prize Jury (including Ben Shahn) and a page from a Bauhaus book on management, is perhaps to be taken as a reminder, or an index, of the need for engaged critical awareness in the practice of visual production, if it is not simply to be enrolled as support for a system which fundamentally destroys its power of engagement by mak-

ing it the strongest prop of the values of a repressive, but increasingly invisible, structure of controls.

In any case, these works, and the critical intelligence which is behind them, are absolutely clearly refusing that 'postmodern' notion of arbitrary appropriation, and the view of 'history' (as changeless moment) which underlies it. Such a view is simply the form of historical *unconscious* that power would love to establish as the universal frame of mind; where everything is essentially the same, obviously nothing either need or indeed can be changed. I think Dunn's works presented here seek to break out of this sterile impasse, to suggest contradictions in the 'seamless garment' of official 'history', to indicate, in a subtle and non-didactic way, some of the excisions, the silencings, the eliminations which that official construction of history as identity has entailed. And as such, they precisely parallel what has been my intention in producing this rather sceptical discourse on the implications of the invention of an 'identity' based on a two-hundred-year bounded text.

*In seventeen hundred and eighty eight peculiar beings the colour of dead people emerged from the belly of an enormous fish; and as they reached the unwelcoming shore they immediately began making up stories about themselves ...*

Rob Horne, June, 1987

## NOTES

1. Sir Francis Bacon, *The Advancement of Learning*, p.64
2. Aristotle, *Poetics*, p.24
3. Quoted in Parker and Smith (eds) *The General Crisis of the Seventeenth Century*, p.8
4. G.W.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, p.427
5. According to David Armstrong, Director of the Bicentennial Authority (quoted in R. White, *Inventing Australia*, p.171)
6. Quoted in B. Smith (ed) *Documents on Art & Taste in Australia*, pp.274-5
7. Quoted in R. White, op.cit.
8. F. Nietzsche, *Human, All-Too-Human*, Preface
9. Donald Horne, *The Lucky Country*
10. M. Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*
11. K. Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, Preface
12. I must acknowledge John Tagg as the originator of this wonderful extension of Marx's formula.

*Night and Day*, detail,  
1987 Lindy Lee



## BREAKING LIGHT by Edward Colless

Reference: *NIGHT AND DAY*, 1987, artist Lindy Lee

AN HASIDIC story tells of how a group of poor villagers, sitting together in a squalid inn one Sabbath night, to pass the time tell, each in turn, what their secret wish would be. One wants money; another dreams of furniture. At last it comes the turn of a stranger, even shabbier than the locals, a beggar in rags seated in a dark corner. He explains his wish is to be a powerful king in a distant land, whose country and whose very castle are invaded by his fiercest enemies one night while he sleeps. Roused in the alarm he has no time to even dress and must flee in his shirt. Desperately escaping through forests and over mountains for days and nights, he eventually reaches, dirty and ravaged but safe, that very inn that night, to be found seated on the bench in the darkest corner. Stupefied, the villagers ask what on earth this wish would grant him. He answers, "At least I'd have a shirt."

Walter Benjamin repeats this story to put us into the milieu of Franz Kafka's world, that village of Kafka's whose eldest citizen cannot imagine there being time enough in one man's life to ride to the next village; but in this, Benjamin's, village the beggar in the dark corner that night absurdly "rides toward his past in order to catch hold of himself in the figure of the fleeing king." One might wonder whether there would be time enough to catch that shadow, or if that interminable distance is just what occasions the laughter at a man's identity depending so much on the exaggerated difference between having and not having a shirt. A wry paradox not unlike the conceit which Zeno once put before a man wishing to step from one point to another – that he must first traverse half the distance, and so on *ad infinitum*: his movement is impossible, his wish forsaken by logic. And yet he takes the step, and abominates reality as the effect of wishful thinking. The beggar's own humorous wish to step so differently into that position which in reality is his given starting point means that he will indeed never leave the inn or escape the parable: a mystical Jewish humour given expression in a generously indulgent anguish peculiar to the endless experience of exile and dispossession.

ONE MIGHT eerily accent this story even as one compulsively repeats it: for what if one forgets in retelling to stress difference of the sole possession of this exiled king – that this torn and filthy shirt no longer indicated any former regal status but was, by the time he had reached the inn, a sign only of a beggar's dress; what if he was to reach the inn and be seated on the bench in exactly the condition in which he is first asked by the villagers to tell his wish? What on earth would that wish then grant him? He might reply, "To have arrived where I am now, so as to have the opportunity to tell my story."

In a subtle catastrophe, we are no longer in Kafka's world, nor in that Hasidic village. It might initially appear more like the terrain of tales collected by the brothers Grimm, the picaresque episode of an imposter, or a prince who appears indistinguishable from a pauper, or of a belated Christian parable of the misrecognised messiah: but with an even more modern twist than Kafka's parables – a postmodern trope – it is not so much the tale of a counterfeit but of a clone. For the humour of this story is now that of uncanny co-incidence; not merely in the sorcery of an inducement of the real from a wish, but the paradoxical replication of the wish as the real. And it is

neither a fantastic nor marvellous identity that this beggar/king would have: instead of intrigue or mystery, this stranger's identity would have an abysmal insignificance, dispersed in a metonymic series *ad infinitum* even as it endlessly returns trying to prove its self-equivalence.

Yet the insignificance of this mock-Sisyphian figure is redeemed repeatedly these days as parable and a pretext to an expressionless art whose postmodern hero labours after Sisyphus to demonstrate the deconstruction of identity by the contemporary technology of eternal return: serial reproduction. It is one of the most predictable and dreary features of the critical exposition of postmodernism, as belated critical theory attempting to fulfill the agenda of the 1970s. And it is a compulsively repetitious chant: invoking the stereotype as nemesis of originality, or indefinite similitude as the scandalous defamation of unities closed by resemblance (defamation by seriality of the name of identity, the originating word).

But as this chorus attempts to dispel the aesthetic of a newly figurative power (a phenomenon of the contemporary art for which it wishes to be the "non-objective" correlative, the shadow of the escaping king) so we can begin to notice yet another eerie accent on the formula, one which effaces the didactic residue of 70s criticism as it quietly restates the paradoxical resemblance of the wish to the real, and as it points to the immateriality and inconsequence of that change of the one into the other, of their equivalence. One might then have forgotten the parable (or laughed with Kafka at the end, admitting that it merely tells you the incomprehensible is incomprehensible), but have glimpsed in the last turn of its postmodern trope the spiritualizing moment of an immaterial identity affirming its angelic name.

WHERE LINDY LEE'S work with photocopied Renaissance portraits over the past two years has escaped those doctrinaire demands is exactly at the point of figurative restraint on seriality: her iconic power with quotation effects a kind of classicizing circumscription of the daemonic logic of the series, angelic seclusion, endowing a cold medium with a decorous expressive strength and curbing that medium's amorality with an epicurean sensibility. Like the pauper/king her work resides in the wish to arrive at itself, but in its predestined inability to prove its self-identity it figures out a wistful expression, a style of resignation: exactly an expression which the Hasidic humour cannot allow – called *azvut*, a sadness that comes from dwelling upon one's sin or failure, a sadness that hinders one from God's service (whereas *merirut*, or bitterness at one's remoteness from God, is for the Hasidim a lively, aggressive and commendable emotion that pierces through desolation with the "burning enthusiasm" of travesty and sarcasm ... which we might recognise today in a postmodern, post-Kafkaesque taste for camp and burlesque).

This sadness which disengages one from duty and doctrine however is not that distinctly modern morose *furor* arising from an alienating spleen or the resentment celebrated in marginalized subjectivity. If it is beyond these modern or even hyper-modern manifestations then the sadness with which Lindy Lee's art is so exquisitely concerned returns us to an older solitude in which the incompleteness of life is justified rather than mortified by an ideal; an ideal, both aesthetic and ethical, of what in recent times only Adorno and Barthes, at the end of their lives and their modernity, had been courageous and precise enough to call "the good life". A solitary resignation or retreat, sign of a temperament rather than an affliction; this sadness is known more familiarly in the West as Melancholy, and perhaps better understood as the virtue

defined by Kant's sublime "sadness without cause", or the bitter-sweet poetic ideal of Milton's "sad luxury of woe" personified as a "Pensive Nun", or "a goddess sage and holy".

Historically, the melancholic temper of Lindy Lee's portraits seems to emerge from a turn against the dispassionate operationality of early 1980s neo-conceptualism, away from the glib Business Administration mimicry of the hypermodern *vita contempliva*, once slickly parodied by the *Artforum* and *Studio International* conceptual artists of the late 60s. Rather like Sherrie Levine and Cindy Sherman who – despite their former currency as image-scavenging illustrators of New York's critique of originality and expressionism – have revealed more and more a renewal of interest in the hermetic emotionality of the *symboliste* "correspondence" (noted by some critics as a renewal of allegory), Lindy Lee has discovered in the spiritual (rather than formal) hermeticism of late modern abstraction a sentiment that "corresponds" to the ritual value of art, a *symboliste* sense of beauty. Valery formulated beauty as requiring "the servile imitation of what is indefinable in objects", which condition Benjamin respectfully qualified as "the object of experience in the state of resemblance." That sentiment which is glimpsed through the translucent eyes of Lee's photocopied faces, or which breathes in the darkly ethereal impasto of her paintings, is exhaled as just that resemblance to the paradoxical spirituality of Ad Reinhardt even in his sardonic reductivism, or to the purity of Yves Klein even in his most extravagant "Rosicrucian" transport, or to the critical abstraction of Andy Warhol even in his most mannered Manhattan society portraiture.

It is a sentiment veiled in its very reproduction, and by that occultation – which is more a matter of confidentiality than labyrinthine calculation – the image is re-invested with an esoteric ceremony. A melancholic ceremony too, to be sure, but not necessarily a solemn one. Lindy Lee's work has an elusive comic aspect; in a sadly neglected idiom of the 1950s it once might have been termed "downbeat" (a fragile and an eerie placement of accent). To its credit this melancholy is far too cool to exhibit the strident vitalism and transgressive impulse of the Blues; but neither is it frigidly self-possessed in the fashion of tedium, ennui or nostalgia ... rather what it laments, which in the bitter-sweet temper is what inspires it, is a necessary admission of diminishment of being by that which names itself, but to which it is resigned through a poetics of *echo*.

— ONLY PERVERSELY could one then interpret this echo as anything but the diminution of aura. Lindy Lee's work is steeped in melancholy because her art acknowledges the figure of the copy as the diminishing echo of materiality (of its unique instance) and this echo as the occasion of a spiritual evanescence. And in this regard her work assuredly offers a unique treatment of quotation that tropes the iconicity of Warhol's silkscreens, divesting his grammar of stereotype, platitude and triviality (in short, of its camp disdain) but renewing its formalism (which otherwise emblemizes the cliché genic matrix of popism) with a ceremonial dedication to the very automatism of gesture that once provided Warhol with the premise for a conceit based on paradoxical irony.

When Warhol would allow for all the accidents of commercial screenprinting (streaking, flooding, misregistration) to reveal the materiality of the process in, for instance, his Elvis or Jackie Kennedy series he was of course quoting the unevenness

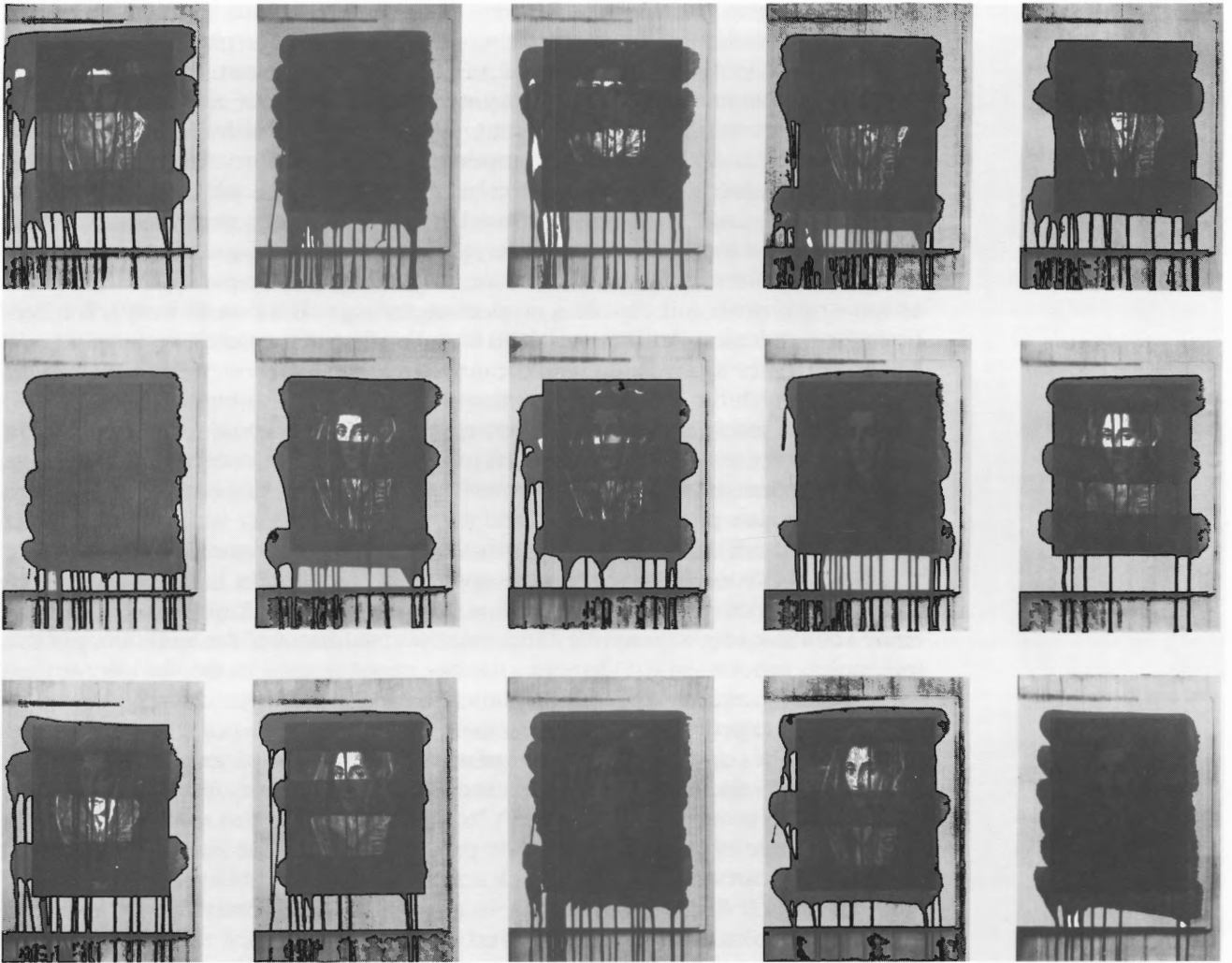
of the repetition of the image in mass-production in order to critique the existential specificity accorded to the heroic gesturality of his precursors, the abstract expressionists, ironizing the pictorial gesture and the "all-over" field of paint even further than had Jasper Johns. It is, in effect if not in essence, a similarly ironic project that Richard Prince has pursued through the morphology of pictorial accidents accrued within the rephotography of details from advertising imagery, though Prince may protest his was a critique not only of gesturality but also of iconicity. On the other hand, as Lindy Lee's images are built up by repeated scanning through the photocopier, the misregistrations and the cumulative pitting of this dense carbon-like deposit in no way refer to the seriality of the image, but quite the contrary insist on the isolated and obscure occasion of its example, an example which appeals, simultaneously as it pales and evaporates before us, to the ideality of its dark precursor: the identity of the image itself (haunting of the text, hovering iconicity).

IS IT IMPROPER to see in these panels the picture of a woman? This seems an almost impertinent question: gesture, trace, deposit should not return us to an iconic presence, should not conserve representation, or would do so these days only at the risk of anachronistic solecism. Perversely, one senses the duty to say: despite the black veils, washes and dribbles, and despite the profoundly emblematic blue ground, the identity of the image is nonetheless pictorially just the successively overlaid materiality of the photocopier's automatist rendering: reflexively marked reproductions of reproductions. And perhaps the emblematic resonance of the paint itself is a canny dissimulation, can be decoded through the citational fabric of this image's textuality.

Just so, it is exactly *in spite of* those moments in the image which dematerialize the functional legibility of the copy that one tries to read the image and match it not against its source, the object the artist has taken to the machine in lieu of that which the text-book image has replaced, but against its theoretical model: inter-textual *copiā*. This reading is perverse, spiteful because it disavows the poignant materiality of the object, the book itself (its shadowy edges depicted in the copy, which is surrendered almost immediately to that materiality of the copying technique which in turn evaporates as ghostly figuration; and if one resorts here to a metaphor of immaterial apparition, it is because what we look into in this work is a pattern of fading resemblances rather than a serial dynamo of similitudes.

If one does see a woman's face it is uncanny; it is the reappearance of the original through the very dematerialization of the signs of technique. It is not that one surprises a gaze from the late 16th century incarnated as this face, as if one stumbled through a forest of symbols onto Diana naked; what is seen is instead that the gaze has lost its body, yet still lights the black lake of space into which has fallen its ancestry. The illumination is of El Greco, but his lustre only mutely touches the occasion of this apparition to veil its resemblance in the anonymity of the woman's face. (Scholarship cannot yet conclude if this may be the portrait of Donna Jeronima de las Cuevas, El Greco's "mysterious companion" and life-long love.)

IT IS AS IF one asks the question, What have I seen?, only in the manner of the



*Night and Day*, 15 parts, 1987 Lindy Lee

stupefied villagers picturing the beggar's double sitting before them. Just as in the parable, the question reflects on a sleight of hand: What gesture ghosts this image as it simultaneously undoes its own technique? An automatic gesture, epitomized in the dissolution of its medium. Decay of the indexical substance of action; decaying into resonance it corrupts that concordance of efficiency, noted by Walter Benjamin, among the technical innovations of modernity which require triggering, switching gestures, "one abrupt movement of the hand"; the lifting of a telephone receiver for instance, or the single striking of the match. (Lyotard has suggested that the mechanical efficiency of the match initiates the syntagmatic chain of quotidian productivity, heating the coffee that keeps a man awake to go to work; in its paradigmatic manifestation – pyromania – it dissolves production through its superefficiency). For Benjamin the ontological significance of this flash, this flare of the match, was explicated a few decades after its invention with the development of the shutter mechanism of the camera by which the light of an instant was admitted into the film's chamber and to an eternity of recollection ... "the camera gave the moment a posthumous shock." But the photocopier's trigger sparks an even more morbid pallor in things; loitering as an eventless instant the machine light scans the thing in an infinitesimal shallowness between the glass plate of its "lens" and the surface in contact with it. The decay of light and space is hyperbolic beyond that layer of surface contact, so that the mere volume of the book beyond the page appears in the copy to have receded into a monochrome nether-world only centimetres in depth but impossible to traverse. Lindy Lee's imagery begins with a measured overstatement of the inefficiency of this mechanical process, which abandons the automatist gesture to the shadowy nether-world of the machine's decaying "technical" space, a technique disembodied by its own insistent repetition within the draining flash of luminescence and its automatist reduction of the copy to the gesturality of a singular "all-over" pictorial field.

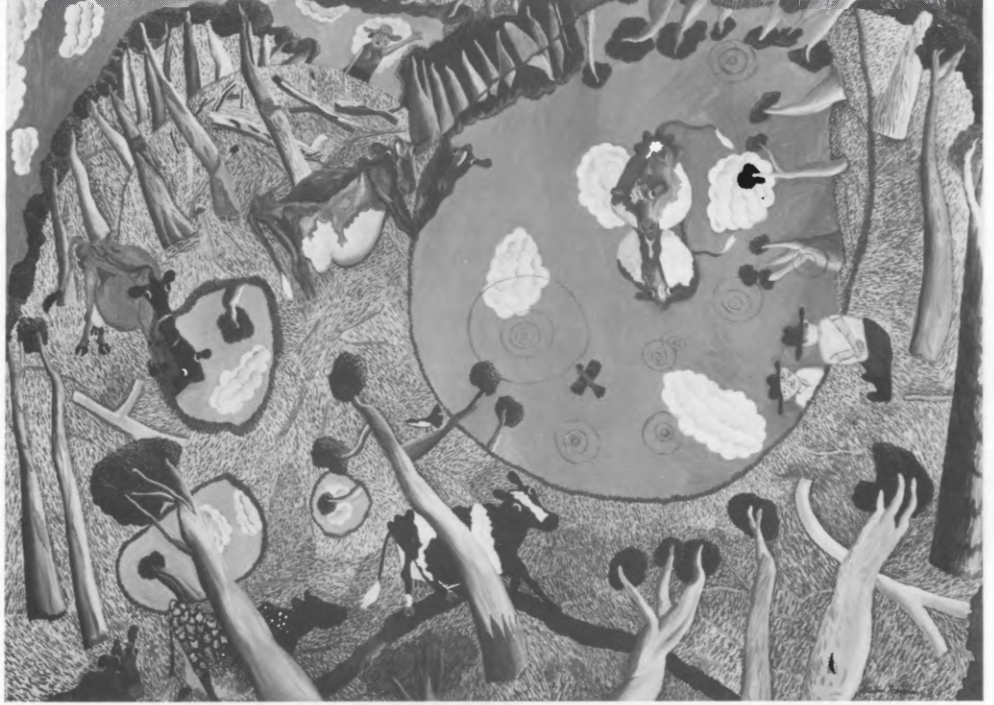
WHERE IS the image, then? It is the ghosted image only that appears in the planar, layered geometry of the copier's "technical" space. In that space we can try to read the passage of gestures from white paper support to blue acrylic "wash" to the deposit of the carbon copy to the black acrylic streaks and dribbles; each one successively closing off the previous gesture in an internal sedimentary history, fossilizing the actions as pictorial incidents interred within precise optical and physical layers. But these fossils are the *indexes* of action, deposited in an anachronistic substantiality of the image, a forensic textuality. The image's physical intelligibility resides in the figurative recapitulations of its substance: the black paint indicating both its specific gravity (the streak, the dribble) and its specific mass (the pools and blots of paint) as these forces claim the photocopy's anterior placement, signing the copy as a gesture in the lineage of late modern gesturality. Yet it is all the more a melancholic substance for its attempt to veil and possess the weightless, directionless ideality of the face that momentarily lights the dulled carbon image. For the *icon* spiritualizes the medium of that image, dematerializing its technical space; it pictures the transubstantiation of the fossil of action, rendering an inactive essence to the thing, which is resembled by the decay of the original as its diminishing truth, its hidden name.

Thus might one comprehend the weightless blue of these images as not a background field, site of the gesture testifying to the work's technical production, but rather as the very disaccumulation of technical materiality. This blue, industrially produced ultramarine, is descended evidently from Yves Klein's unique and fanciful "International Klein Blue": its optical resemblance to, and symbolic echo of, Klein's blue fall within the shadow of that colour's purity; its brushstrokes take the colour beyond the edge of its support (unlike the photocopy's imprint which occupies the entire technical surface of the support but ends there with it), these brushstrokes take the blue into the spectral interval between each panel, as though the support of each panel only partakes of this substance, a blue which gives its translucent hue to the tonal tableau of the blackening image, disappropriating its medium. The image is absorbed within the essential radiance of the blue as its darkening mystery, veiling of its name.

DARKENING; paradoxically a gift of the lustre of essence, a halting vision that Barthes might describe as the "obtuse", "matte", or Baudelaire as "dullness" – arrested movement in his comprehension of beauty: "It is to this that we owe it if eyes are sad and translucent like blackish swamps or if their gaze has the oily inertness of tropical seas."

Lustre; or the breaking light that overshadows Poe's city of night: "All was dark yet splendid – as that ebony to which has been likened the style of Tertullian." This beauty – style of Tertullian, a "love as black as ebony" (*Love's Labour's Lost*, IV, iii) – a dark face of inspired melancholy, which the Florentine Neoplatonists knew as *melancholia generosa*, is both that veiled anonymity of El Greco's "companion" and the secret name of one's angelic evanescence, one's heavenly image called *zelem* in the Lurianic Kabbalah (*Genesis*, 1, 26) – luminous individuality of disengagement, and Emerson's "condition of the true naming ... by abandonment to the nature of things" – which one wishes so directly to identify in the eyes of this face.

Edward Colless, June, 1987



*Puddle Landscape No. 1*, 1986 William Robinson

*Pee Wee Landscape*, 1985 William Robinson



## WILLIAM ROBINSON by Nancy Underhill

Reference: The work of artist William Robinson

Bill Robinson knows that a large measure of painting is about self identification. That doesn't obsess him, he knows where he came from, where he is at and is comfortable with both. However this does not mean that his paintings are purposely comprehensible to their viewers, they're not and the more one looks at them, one is forced to conclude that Robinson never intended them to be overt. To use contemporary jargon, there is a strategy about their apparent directness and quaintness that tells you two things. One that Robinson is not quite so uncomplicated, or ordinary as he posits and secondly that the pictures are very much about picture making.

All this became apparent to me during an interview with Robinson in which he said that he could not imagine why I found his life interesting. He maintained instead that it was all very mundane, he had a wife, six children, taught, lived on a farm, rarely went away or broke his routine and his pictures were about all that because he could only paint things he knew very well like the cows that stepped on him. Robinson then suggested, in way of passing, that surely Molvig was more exciting, more challenging to write about. When I replied that for me it was quite the contrary, that I found Molvig and sometimes even his art almost archetypal and therefore of lesser intrigue, Robinson was honestly perplexed. He then became ever so slightly defensive, or rather protective, when I added that were he all that ordinary, it was odd that his neighbors did not paint pictures like his. His reply was revealing. He quickly added that the valley really looked like that, we'd go for a walk and I'd see it was so. Of course the valley does not look like his pictures – unless you enter it with a magical mind's eye and with some willingness to think about those overlaid viewpoints and colour harmonies that Bonnard somehow used to instil quiet restorative repose or the way Matisse used bold planes. Then I came to understand Robinson's remark that when he first studied his pictures of chooks or *William with Rosie*, (1980) he worried where "my beautiful Bonnard had gone". What he was in fact admitting was that with that group of chook pictures, first shown to an incredulous and largely unconvinced public at Ray Hughes in 1978, Robinson had quite dramatically established his own subject matter and a vocabulary capable of expressing it.

Robinson's pictorial independence evolved very slowly out of an arid training that must have smothered many less methodical painters. Equally I am sure that the less than conducive environment Robinson encountered in the Queensland Teachers College or The Central Technical College during the 1950s nurtured his natural defense of an essentially unconscious protective screening.

This training and most especially the atmosphere of his tertiary education could only be called antediluvian. At Teachers College in the 1950's male students had to wear long trousers, long sleeved shirts and stand when the teacher came in. After an unwilling stint in the air force for national service, Robinson was awarded one of the three scholarships which provided teachers two years art training at the Technical College on full salary. At that time the head of the Central Technical College, Mr. McGrath, kept a stop and go sign outside his office to monitor appointments and everybody had to fill in the time book. Robinson's teachers included Cyril Gibbs who

always wore a suit, "Holly" Graham, Melville Haysom and Arthur Evan Read. The last two Robinson remembers as basically sympathetic and certainly encouraging but nonetheless very conservative. The teaching was equally hierarchical and based on what had long been taught in provincial Britain. Lettering for example was a required subject and the phrase "great souls suffer in silence" had to be perfected in Roman script. Students endlessly drew from casts of antique sculpture and should any correction of line or smudging be visible, Mr. Gibbs would not pass the work. In painting class tonal relations were all important and in order to perfect them one could only paint in umber and white for the first two years. Other colours were permitted in your third year.

But as Robinson is quick to note, one learnt to observe, to relate, and there is much to be said for an insistence on tonal values. With regard, to and in partial defense of, this hidebound training scheme, Robinson stresses that at least he learnt nothing bad and blessedly the course contained very little affected intellectualism. Pseudo modernism or main-chancing remains one of Robinson's pet peeves. There was no notion of becoming a painter overnight, and no pretense that painting was about self indulgent, misunderstood abstraction. Abstract art simply did not exist and as many of the students had never been outside Queensland, most including Bill Robinson only knew what they learnt in class or could find in books. The basic text for secondary school Senior students was still Orpen's *Outline of Art*. That is where they found out about Picasso but to quote Bill, "when it stopped, we stopped". Van Gogh was the first so-called modern artist Robinson found accessible, then Matisse and after that Bonnard. Bonnard's rejection of pure local colour, his use of multi-view points and frontality intrigued Robinson. They still do.

As soon as Robinson finished his art course he was offered part time work at the College and has with considerable movement between various tertiary institutions in Queensland, remained a teacher ever since; thankfully for all concerned his days of improvising on bookbinding and basketweaving are over. To Robinson, teaching is a serious profession that returns to him important personal and artistic stimulation and he certainly does not view it only as a handy source of regular income for his family and some freedom to paint. With that attitude it is hardly surprising that his students find Robinson a valued and flexible teacher.

Robinson has yet to travel overseas, and he and Shirley seem to have created a life that ensures settled routine and privacy rather than travel. Robinson maintains that he is even loath to go interstate except when his dealer, Ray Hughes, in whom Robinson has great trust and who has shown unshakeable support for Robinson's work, so wishes Robinson also rarely engages in Brisbane's increasingly frenetic and versatile art world. Like Mona Ryder who is another very self-reliant Queensland trained artist, Robinson does not paint mainly from other people's art and certainly never engages in current theoretical art debate. By essentially relying on himself, he has been able to turn what most would call impoverished ground into a rich and multilayered world. Today his farm at Canungra, family, teaching and gently ironic romantic imagination nourish an abundant harvest of painting.

When Robinson was still training and just beginning to teach, Brisbane did yield a few windows on the world although the major, early ones proved rather opaque. The very important touring exhibition, French Painting Today was shown in Brisbane during 1953 but Robinson remembers it as having arrived "out of the blue", been

baffling and if anything for him it tended to confirm the dangers rather than the possibilities inherent in progressive, near contemporary art. His lack of historical and critical context proved a very high hurdle that at least as far as Robinson was concerned was not appreciably lowered by Gertrude Langer's lectures or art reviews. It is generally agreed that Gertrude and Karl Langer who arrived in Brisbane from Vienna in 1939, Jon Molvig, Roy Churcher and Brian Johnstone's gallery were the main forces of enlightenment for Brisbane's art scene from the late 1950s until well into the 1960s. However Robinson recalls that Dr. Langer's rather descriptive reviews of local exhibitions like that of Roy Dalgarno in the *Courier Mail* did not offer him much entry into the wider contemporary aesthetic issues or isms. Betty and Roy Churcher did.

Fortunately in 1957 Betty and Roy Churcher settled in Brisbane and became firm family friends of the Robinsons. Betty had left Brisbane to study painting at the Royal College, London and had married Roy who studied at the Slade School. The 1950's were vintage student years in London with David Hockney, Patrick Heron, Roger Hilton, Patrick Caulfield, Peter Blake and the Churchers' commitment to contemporary painting and the debates it engendered were conveyed to the Brisbane scene with the Churchers' very special brand of enthusiasm. Robinson stresses that he rarely "talks art" with anybody except his wife Shirley who also studied at the Central Technical College. However the Churchers, and particularly Betty who as a Queenslander, coped more tolerantly with what Robinson so aptly calls Brisbane's mummified art and offered Robinson a kindly sounding board. Roy whose art lauded the spontaneous, was less able to sympathise with Robinson's formative art which thanks to his training was still trimming away the spontaneous. After 1955, aside from the group at the College and the one which formed about the Churchers, Jon Molvig was the other major artistic presence on the Brisbane art scene. Robinson who has never found socializing particularly conducive, did not become a camp follower of Molvig's and Molvig's bold, angst ridden painting and explosive personality were at odds with virtually everything Robinson found inherent to his own art. It is a little startling to hear Robinson relate how little the various groups mixed with each other. Robinson, for instance, only spoke briefly once with Molvig at one of the H C Richards prizes at the Queensland Art Gallery. Robinson had submitted a nude which the then Director, James Wieneke, had been very reluctant to hang because of her very purple bottom and it pleased Robinson that Molvig was kind enough to tell him that he liked the work. Incredibly in a town as small as Brisbane, that was about the sum of their exchange.

As soon as Robinson began to exhibit with Ray Hughes in 1977, people had problems with his work and to give Hughes full due he was one of the few who saw beyond the obvious chooks, cows and so on that make it so tempting to trivialize Robinson's work or to label it primitive which it certainly is not. Critics can't resist an easy line like ... Queensland farmer paints his chooks ... which is especially catchy given today's Queensland. There's more to it than that and sooner or later Robinson's work compels a spectator to look at the it from a painter's point of view.

For example take the pictures *William and Rosie* and *Beechmont Night*. In one Robinson has worked with two large almost iconic images and has placed them on the surface to see if they could create, indeed maintain their own space, not just the 2D pictorial space but the space that the Italian phrase "to have ones own space"

refers to. This is a psychological confrontation of sorts and one that Robinson has enhanced by referencing it to that great pictorial dilemma, namely the challenge of suggesting the third dimension or reality on a flat and artificial surface. *Beachmont Night* on the other hand sets out to break that same arbitrary flat surface of the canvas up in much the same way a film or television director can cut from one zoom lens to another and thereby create a sense of destabilization and vastness. In this case the scale set by Robinson and his wife and the wondrous orchestration of colour transpose one into what becomes a no-place, a vast utopia. Only the paint holds one on the surface and metaphorically keeps you from falling off the cliff.

In recent pictures like *Landscape with Spitting Image* (1987) his paint has been crafted into thousands of orderly, match stick sized strokes that form a skin across the canvas. These strokes do not enunciate the volumetric properties of the trees etc. and in fact work against such narrative modelling. Instead they play on the spectator's imagination by suggesting the microscopic life that inhabits and creates the landscape. One thinks of the worms, ants, leeches and other creatures that by constantly burrowing through the soil and trees create the environment and yet live virtually unseen within it. Thus Robinson's handwriting, for this is what a painter's markings are, not only works to formally assert the independence of the canvas as a work of art, as opposed to the notion of a picture as a reproduction of the seen world, but it also symbolizes the organic ever changing environment of the landscape. Robinson's recent pictures form an informal series that simultaneously address the extremes of nature. They laud both the pantheistic and microscopic forces at work in nature. Man, even Robinson and his wife, are only allowed to stand and wonder at something that is quite frankly beyond their control. Likewise, in Robinson's work the viewer is only allowed to sweep like a bird might across the artist's world, after that the barriers go up and Robinson is left alone supposedly in peace with his dreams. This visual cut off is not unlike the protective role that Hughes as Robinson's dealer plays or the way that the distance from Brisbane to Canungra offers physical separation. Once again we come back to that Italian phrase about space.

Robinson has said that now he feels confident with his work he delights to play the artistic daredevil by taking risks, such as painting subjects like rainbows, even himself riding on a charger à la David's Napoleon off over the mountain and into the sunset. Art is not necessarily about heroic stances, self-inflicted alienation, rational interpretations, theories, or even political causes; like life it can also contain respite, and sheer, healthy indulgence. To this end Robinson paints the Australian landscape in a way not unlike a cheerful, playful Boyd or better John Olsen. It is not meant to be aggressively Australian. Robinson does not feel the need to try and paint himself into the tradition of Australian landscape art. Apparently his training in Brisbane was no more concerned with Australian art, the Heidelberg School included, than it was with Abstract Expressionism. Instead, as Robinson stated, his training did teach him to observe and to paint free of overriding obsessions about styles and theories.

Art used to be categorised without a great deal of confusion according to the type of picture in the academic hierarchy of history, portrait, landscape, genre and judged by a combination of the correctness of the narrative message and the artist's technical facility. Gradually this was supplanted and art was fitted into specific "isms" or styles which meant that all too often the art got boxed up inside its assigned "ism" or an artist's biographical chronology. This familiar framework still applied in much

art history. Today we are post-modernists, soon no doubt to enter another era and fair enough – everybody likes to know where they are.

However in this desire, something has washed across the visual arts that if allowed to run unchecked, could end by smothering both artists and art. I refer to the prevalence of working firstly from a theoretical percept rather than a visual object. This methodology has shifted the critics from the fairly peripheral location of willing amplifier or even devil's advocate to where they are considered the obvious experts to decode an artwork. The net result of this strategy is that a lot more art seems to need such attention and that critics or theorists as some call themselves, rather than an artist, curator or member of the public now call the shots. Other people are made to feel inferior, less knowledgeable. Not surprisingly we can have artist/theorists, curator/theorists and so on. Furthermore art tends to be considered authentic to the degree that it adheres to or bespeaks a theoretical posture. History has shown that all too often orthodoxies of any persuasion have left very little room to move.

Fortunately there are always exceptions. For instance artists who just go on making pictures which warns others that categories whether of the Academy, isms or theories are not always very conducive to creative freedom. Bill Robinson is one of those people and one of those painters. There is a lot to be learnt from him if we do our own looking and maybe as he does, ask a private question or two.

Nancy Underhill, May, 1987

*William and Rosie*, 1980 William Robinson





*Venezuela*, a still from the video, Geoff Weary

## THE BODY ON THE BED by Ross Gibson

Reference: *VENEZUELA*, 1985, artist; Geoff Weary

In Sydney, if you pick your time judiciously – say, Wednesday, 9.45 AM, following peak-hour and just before the commercial delivery-vehicles have left the warehouses – you can drive from St Ives to St Peters, north to south, in just under an hour. It's a little trek that can jeopardise your sense of who and where you are.

St Ives is probably a good place to put behind you first thing in the morning. Over the last six months some of the estate agents who deal in the blue riband properties of the area have taken to titling their sales notices in Afrikaans, and the citizens of less grand-and-green suburbs have renamed the place “St Africa”. Elsewhere in the world, something is happening, and Kruger Rands are having a definite though discreet impact right here.

So, it's 9.45 AM, and you drive past the estate agents and head out on to the Pacific Highway, main artery to the heartland of Liberal-voting middle-Australia ... Pymble, Gordon, Lindfield, Roseville, Chatswood, Gore Hill ... Then through enclaves in St Leonards and Crow's Nest where the estate agents and smallgoods shops are festooned with Japanese characters ... The next eight minutes take you through North Sydney, across the Harbour Bridge and into the Central Business District, all serviced by multinational capital, especially American and Japanese interests, although Hong Kong money is buying up big now that the lease on the “British” island is truly running out ... Trundle in second gear south of the the CBD, through a large and expanding Chinatown ... On to George Street and Broadway – three sets of lights, and the road forking right leads up to Leichhardt and Sydney's largest Italian community ... But the road bending left is the one you take, past the University and into Newtown – traditionally Greek, Lebanese and Anglo-Saxon proletarian, but more recently under the newer influences of three-tiered Vietnamese families and yuppie refurbishing ... Three gears and three sets of lights take you down Newtown's fabled King Street ... Roads to the left lead to Alexandria, Erskineville, and to Redfern where the most visible people, the people who define the place are Koori ... South out of Newtown, on to the Princes Highway, and you might notice two generic car types – the remodelled Datsuns or Toyotas currently popular among Austro-Vietnamese youth, and the 1970s Holdens or Falcons seemingly preferred by the Melanesians who have moved into St Peters over the last decade ... Falcons are parked outside Fijian supermarkets run principally by Findian retailers.

Drive for sixty minutes in any direction in Sydney, and you'll cross communities that will respond to Bicentennial celebrations with indifference. Indeed, from many points of view, the only encouraging aspect of 1988 is the possibility that, in attempting to rerun and refine its myths of national unification, white middle-class Australia will present itself to public scrutiny at a time when it is demonstrably no longer in charge of the vital or constituent factors of an “Australian society”. There's the chance that no-one will come to the party, or that those who do turn up will be misbehaving

or gatecrashing.

It's not only metropolitan Australia that could spoil the festivities. Stick a pin in any sector of the national map, and polygot communities can be located, from Broome to Burnie to Barcaldine. (When I rang SBS to ascertain how many language groups the multi-cultural national broadcaster served, they couldn't give an exact number, but guessed it to be in excess of seventy-five.)

If there must be a festival of nationhood, the best thing to celebrate thereby, as far as I can tell, is the fact that a nation is not a natural thing and is therefore subject to change and redefinition. On a world scale this is obvious. The history of warfare is the history of nations. Until recently the history of global economics has been the history of waxing and waning national entities. Indeed, after at least three centuries when geopolitics has been dominated by English-speaking nations and alliances, there is now concern amongst 'intelligence' organisations in those very alliances that Spanish language and Spanish money (channelled through multifarious and unregulable industries in South America and Hispanic North America) are poised to gain global ascendancy during the next hundred years.

It is for modest reasons of destabilisation, therefore, that I'm pleased to promote a piece like Geoff Weary's *Venezuela* in the context of "The I.D. Show". If forums are being set up nowadays to discuss the nation, I'm happiest to be involved in any project that disturbs the relationship of a citizen to a fatherland or a motherland. For, once that disturbance has occurred, reconciliation is set in play, and that's where mutation is possible. (I'm taking it for granted that we are in agreement, you and I, that we are desirous of change in this place at this time.)

As I see and hear it, *Venezuela* sets up a minimalist analysis of the dynamics between people and their environments at personal, communal, and national levels. In fact, on reflection (and reflection is what *Venezuela* demands of you) I'd be hesitant to call it an analytic work. Perhaps it's more accurately described as catalytic. It is a collection of cues priming a kind of ruminative chemistry. By supplying the barest details of several interconnecting stories of encounter and conciliation, it calls forth a "bardic" impulse in its audience. The stories are there; they are your stories if you want them; now you must exercise your right to tell (or to disbelieve). It is a right that can fail if not exercised. It is the right to have a say in what gets counted true.

There are at least three functions to perform when we participate in *Venezuela*: to recognise the details for what they can mean; to piece selected details together into a particular myth (or narrative); and finally to decide how one might interweave the several myths into a mythology, something multidimensional that is undeniably fictional but also undoubtedly constitutive of what is called true in a community or even in a nation.

When we examine each detail of *Venezuela* we see and hear the simplest elements of cinema: a few still images conjoined; some sounds overlaid. Each image is carefully chosen and precisely framed; the same may be said of each sound. In fact, this action of framing – a definitive notion in cinema – is explicit through the entire



*Venezuela*, a still from the video, Geoff Weary

work. All the aural discourses – the geographical empiricism, the economic details, the bi-lingual commentary, the kitsch “SouthAmericana” of the music – they are all modes by which the profusion of possible meanings can be trimmed; they are framing devices restricting the perceptible world so that *something* can be understood.

Because framing wrenches things from the gestalt, it deceives even as it enables us to perceive. So, to realign the lie on which truth is inevitably constructed, one needs to recombine the details as soon as they are perceived. This collocation, of course, is the other crucial operation in cinema: the alchemical process of montage.

And just as framing is a cardinal concern in *Venezuela*, so the dynamics of *conjunction* are also vital. *Everything in this piece makes sense* (to quote the soundtrack) "only in a relative sense": the liberality of Venezuela; the economic interdependencies of the South American dominions; the definition of a paradisaic South America serving North American leisure-capital (compare this conjunction with Australia's liaisons with the USA); a woman alone in a room and a man alone in a room and the question of how they might be brought together. The details must be connected if meaning is to arise. It then becomes a question of *what* connections and *what* meanings.

This is the motivating question in *Venezuela*. Take a woman's body on a bed; take a man's body on a bed. What do they mean? We can only look to the context in which we find the images. As the details surrounding the bodies change, so the bodies change.

Initially, the woman is "foreign" and "alone", as the soundtrack informs. As her image is montaged with other information, both visual and aural, she becomes not only a particular woman with a specific story but also several generic Women: the generalised object of Machismo romance ("Como esta, Senorita?"); the stereotypical object of a male photographer's libidinous aesthetic; and perhaps South America "herself", as the details of allure, "paradis" and natural abundance are built up throughout the narratives. Is it distress or happiness that we can read on her face?

Initially, the man is dead and violated. This reading has arisen because the image appears in the context of a murmur of violence and repression that runs through the narratives. A few frames beforehand, a man and a woman have encountered each other in a single image, and someone else, someone behind the man, has been responsible for the welts we see on his back. When the male body appears on the bed, therefore, it takes on the squalid aura of the torture photos that seem generically South American. However, later on, the same corpse appears on the same bed, and the holiday-music is playing. Suddenly it's a rich man's body, relaxed and smug in this exotic playground. Is the image any less violent now that it has changed?

*Venezuela* is a romance. But what kind of romance? It is an attempt to dramatise the very notion of *encounter*. A woman meets a country; a man meets a woman; an image meets an image; a sound meets a sound; an image meets a sound; a country meets a country. Depending on how these encounters are negotiated the romance will be more or less a story of colonisation. Whose system of meaning will prevail? That's a question for everyone participating in the romance.

Recently I read a brochure from the Australian Bicentennial Authority. It spoke of "the romance of our past".

# LIST OF WORKS

## RICHARD DUNN

1. "Untitled (Art and Fear)", 1986  
acrylic on canvas, eight parts  
228 x 224 cm  
Private collection
2. "Untitled (Historical Tropes)", 1986  
acrylic on canvas, eight parts  
228 x 224 cm  
Private collection
3. "The Two-fold Character of the Mode of Production", 1985  
acrylic on canvas, 2 parts  
170 x 240 cm  
Courtesy Yuill Crowley Gallery, Sydney

## LINDY LEE

4. "Night and Day", 1987  
Photocopy and acrylic paint on stonehenge paper, 15 parts
5. "Untitled", 1986  
(Portrait of Sir Thomas Le Strange No. II)  
Photocopy on stonehenge paper, 4 parts

## WILLIAM ROBINSON

7. "William and Rosie", 1980  
oil on canvas  
98.0 x 135.6 cm  
Courtesy Ray Hughes Gallery, Sydney
8. "Puddle Landscape I", 1986  
oil on canvas  
124.5 x 173.5 cm  
Courtesy Ray Hughes Gallery, Sydney
9. "Landscape with Spitting Image", 1987  
oil on canvas  
137.0 x 188.0 cm  
Courtesy Ray Hughes Gallery, Sydney
10. "Beechmont Night", 1987  
oil on canvas  
107.0 x 127.0 cm  
Courtesy Ray Hughes Gallery, Sydney
11. "Pee Wee Landscape", 1985  
oil on linen  
98.5 x 110 cm  
Courtesy University of Queensland Art Museum

## GEOFF WEARY

12. "Venezuela", 1985  
video, u-matic, black and white sound-dual track mono  
10 mins approx.
13. "The West"  
Colour and black and white sound film  
58 minutes
14. "Germany"  
Set of ten 50.8 x 61 cm  
Silver gelatin photographs

## **RICHARD DUNN**

Born 1944, Sydney, Australia

### **STUDIED**

1962-64 University of New South Wales

1966-69 Royal College of Art, London

### **SELECTED INDIVIDUAL EXHIBITIONS**

1972, 75, 77 Gallery A, Sydney

1976 Warehouse Gallery, Melbourne  
"Six Positions", modernArt, Sydney

1979 "Heuristic Models", Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane

1980 "Tools of Coincidence", Art Projects, Melbourne  
"Monastery", modernArt, Sydney

1981 "The Second Construction: Barricades", QED, Sydney  
"(a dialogue of objects)", Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane

1982 "Barricades No.3 (The Sheet, The Monochrome and The Banner) 1848", Art Projects, Melbourne

1983 "A-K: The Normal and Domestic", Yuill/Crowley Gallery, Sydney  
"The Bridge", QED, Sydney

1985 PSI, New York  
"Drawing from the Barricades", Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane  
Yuill/Crowley Gallery, Sydney  
Tolamo Galleries, Melbourne

### **SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS**

1978 "The Work and its Context", Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco

1979 Biennale of Sydney

1980 "Frame of Reference", George Paton Gallery, University of Melbourne

1981 "Perspecta", Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney

1982 "Popism", National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne  
"Australian Art of the Last Ten Years", Australian National Gallery, Canberra  
"Attitudes to Drawing", Ivan Dougherty Gallery, Sydney

1983 "D'un Autre Continent: L'Australie, Le Reve at le Reel", ARC, Musee d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris  
"Australian Art in Amsterdam", Suzanne Biederberg Gallery, Amsterdam

1984 "The Australians: Three Generations of Drawing", CDS, New York  
"Recent Australian Painting", Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide  
"Drawing 'Sex'", Yuill/Crowley Gallery, Sydney  
"The Politics of Picturing", Tasmanian School of Art Gallery, Hobart

### **SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS (Cont'd)**

1985 "Selections 30", Drawing Center, New York Clocktower, New York  
"Mass", New Museum, New York  
"Australian Art in Our Time", Memphis Brooks Museum, Memphis

"The Politics of Picturing II", Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane  
"5/5 (Fünf vom Fünften)", DAAD Gallery, Berlin  
"Perspecta", Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney  
"The Pleasure of the Gaze", Art Gallery of Western Australia, Perth

1986 "Monumental Drawings", Contemporary Art Society, Adelaide  
The Biennale of Sydney 1986, Art Gallery of N.S.W.  
"5/5 (Fünf vom Fünften)", Art Gallery of South Australia and Art Gallery of N.S.W.

#### SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

By the artist

"The Spirit of Practice!", *Notes on Art Practice*, Art Projects, Melbourne 1982  
"The Pursuit of Meaning: A Strategy of Parts", *Art & Text*, No. 6, Melbourne, June 1982  
"Skating on Thin Ice", *On the Beach*, No. 2, 1983  
"Other Than What", *Art Network*, No. 13, Sydney, Spring 1984  
"Cultural Scan", *ZG/Art & Text* No. 15, New York and Melbourne, Spring 1983  
"Designed for Living", *On the Beach*, No. 10, Sydney 1986  
Geoffrey de Groen, "Conversations with Australian Artists", *Quartet*, Melbourne 1978  
Memory Holloway: "Popism", *Art Network*, No. 7, Spring 1982  
Paul Taylor: "Popism - The Art of White Aborigines", *Flash Art*, No. 112, May 1983  
John Young: "Anything Still", *Art & Text*, Spring 1983  
Paul Taylor: "Real Life", New York 1983  
Donald Kuspit: "Australian Drawings at CDS", *Art in America*, March 1985  
Jacques Delaruelle, "Richard Dunn", *5/5: Fünf vom Fünften*, DAAD Gallery, Berlin, 1985  
David Bromfield: "The Pleasure of the Gaze", *Art Network*, No. 18, Sydney 1986

#### LINDY LEE

Born 1954, Brisbane, Australia

#### STUDIED

1973-75 Kelvin Grove C.A.E., Brisbane.  
1975 Graduated, Diploma of Education (Art, Secondary School)  
1978 University of Calgary, Alberta, Canada  
(Studied 20th century Western Art; 19th century North American Art; Ancient Greek Art; Renaissance and Baroque Art; 19th and 20th century Science Fiction Writings)  
1978 Università Per Stranieri, Perugia, Italy  
1979-80 The Chelsea School of Art, London, U.K.  
(Completed the first year of B.A. Hons., Painting course)  
1981-82 Sydney College of the Arts  
1983 Graduated, B.A. (Visual Arts)  
1983-84 Sydney College of the Arts  
1985 Graduated, Post-Graduate Diploma (Painting)

#### SELECTED INDIVIDUAL EXHIBITIONS

1985 *Black is not as Black as all that*, Union Street Gallery, Sydney  
1986 Roslyn Oxley Gallery, Sydney

## SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 1982 *From the Inside Out - Aspects of Women's Art*, funded by the Women and Arts Festival, Crafts Council of Australia Gallery, Sydney  
*This Dangerous Game of Mirrors*, Sydney College of the Arts, Sydney
- 1983 *The 1984 Show*, Images Gallery, Sydney
- 1984 *The Rites of Delay*, Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane (with Janet Burchill, curated by Mark Titmarsh)  
*Future Unperfect*, Artspace, Sydney (Curated by Janet Burchill, Kate Farrell)
- 1985 *Queensland Works*, University of Queensland Gallery, Brisbane, (Curated by Nancy Underhill)  
*Pleasure of the Gaze*, Art Gallery of Western Australia, Perth, (Curated by Bruce Adams)  
*Various Artists Ltd.*, One Day Shows, 343 Sussex St., Sydney  
*Close Remarks*, Artspace, Sydney (Curated by Gary Sangster)  
*Design for Living* Artspace, Sydney (Curated by Ted Colless)  
*Australian Perspecta '85*, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney ("On Location" curated by Gary Sangster)  
*Black is not as Black as all that*, Union Street Gallery, Sydney.
- 1986 The Biennale of Sydney, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney  
Roslyn Oxley Gallery, Sydney  
*Falls the Shadow*, Reconnaissance Gallery, Melbourne (Curated by Ashley Crawford)  
*Origins, Originality & Beyond*, the 6th Biennale of Sydney, Art Gallery of New South Wales, (Curated by Nick Waterlow)  
*Future Unperfect 11*, George Paton Gallery, Melbourne  
*The First Look: Phillip Morris Arts Grant Purchases 1983-1986* University Drill Hall, Australian National Gallery, Canberra
- 1987 *Moet & Chandon Touring Exhibition*, Art Gallery of Western Australia, Perth.  
Westpac Gallery, Victorian Arts Centre, Melbourne  
The Drill Hall, Australian National Gallery, Canberra  
Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney  
Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane  
*Chaos*, Roslyn Oxley Gallery, Sydney  
*The Shadow of Reason*, Institutd of Modern Art, Brisbane (Curated by Judy Annear)  
*Light of Day: Between Lindy Lee and Mike Parr*, Australian Centre for Photography, Sydney

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- Alexander, G. "Boomerang - Art Australien"
- Allen, A. + - 0 #46, Fevrier 1987, (Brussels, Belgium)
- Annear, J. "In the Shadow of Reason", *On the Beach* #10, Winter 1986
- Butler, R. "In the Shadow of Lindy Lee", *On the Beach* #10, Winter 1986  
"Lindy Lee" + - 0 #46, Fevrier 1987 (Brussels, Belgium)  
*Light of Day*, Australian Centre for Photography, Sydney, June-July 1987
- Colless, T. "Origins, Originality & Beyond", *Photofile* Vol. 4 #2, Spring 1986
- Dunn, R. "Argument with Design", *On the Beach* #5, Winter 1984
- Periz, T. & Morgan, S. "The Sixth Biennale of Sydney", *Real Life Magazine*, #6, Autumn 1986
- Lumby, C. Catalogue essay under artist's entry in *Origins, Originality & Beyond*, pub. Biennale of Sydney Pty. Ltd.  
"Black is Not As Black As All That", *Follow Me* #23, June-July 1986
- McDonald, J. Galleries Section, *Sydney Morning Herald*, Sept. 23, 1985; October 11, 1985
- Periz, I. "...As the Spirit Gave Them Utterance", catalogue essay, *Design for Living*, pub. Artspace, Sydney
- Sangster, G. "Nothing is Certain", Catalogue essay for solo show at Roslyn Oxley Gallery, March 1986, Sydney
- Simmons, P. "The Italian Connection: Another Sunrise? The Place of the Renaissance in Current Australian Art", *Art Network* #19-20, 1986
- Thirlwell, R. "The Big Show", *Artlink*, Vol.6 #1, Mar/Apr 1986
- Titmarsh, M. "Observations on the Abyssmal", *On the Beach* #6, Spring 1984
- "I See a Red Door and I Want to paint it Black", *Australian Perspecta '85* pub. Art Gallery of New South Wales, 1985.

## **WILLIAM ROBINSON**

Born 1936, Brisbane, Queensland.

### **STUDIED**

- 1954 Queensland Teachers College
- 1955 Won 2 year scholarship to The Art School of the Central Technical College, completed course and then joined the staff
- by 1961 Completed 2 diplomas. Art-teachers Dip., Dip in Drawing and Painting

Currently lives and works in Canungra, Qld., teaches painting at the Brisbane College of Advanced Education.

### **SELECTED INDIVIDUAL EXHIBITIONS**

- 1969 Design Arts Centre, Brisbane
- 1975 Kelvin Grove CAE, Brisbane
- 1977 Ray Hughes Gallery, Brisbane
- 1978 Ray Hughes Gallery, Brisbane
- 1980 Ray Hughes Gallery, Brisbane
- 1981 "Farm Images", Armidale City Art Gallery, and Lismore, NSW
- 1982 Ray Hughes Gallery, Brisbane
- 1985 Ray Hughes Gallery, Sydney
- 1986 Ray Hughes Gallery, Brisbane

### **SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS**

- 1981 "The Queensland Connection", Contemporary Arts Society, Adelaide  
"Nine Queensland Artists", Perc Tucker Regional Gallery, Townsville  
"Ray Hughes Gallery at Pinacotheca", Pinacotheca, Melbourne
- 1983 "Australian Perspecta '83", Art Gallery of New South Wales, (touring component)  
"Acquisitions 1973-1983", University Art Museum, University of Queensland, Brisbane
- 1984 "Ray Hughes at Reconnaissance", Ray Hughes Gallery, Melbourne  
"Ray Hughes at Reconnaissance", Ray Hughes Gallery, Brisbane
- 1985 "The First Exhibition", Ray Hughes Gallery, Sydney  
"Sorry I'm Thinking Aloud", Ray Hughes Gallery, Brisbane
- 1986 "The Death or Resurrection of Originality?", Sixth Biennale of Sydney, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney  
"Thinking Aloud", Drawing Show, Ray Hughes Gallery, Sydney  
"Moments in Qld Contemporary Art", Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane  
"Ray Hughes Gallery at Nieman Marcus", Dallas, Texas
- 1987 "Another Summer, the Australian Landscape", Heide Park Gallery, Melbourne  
"Southbank Exhibition", Brisbane to tour Saitama Museum of Modern Art, Japan

## GEOFF WEARY

Geoff Weary is a Sydney-based artist who works in both film, video and photography. His recent temporally based work has been developed with a view to expanding upon the contextual meanings of the generic term "Film Still".

The Venezuela Project may be read in this sense as an attempt to present a series of "frozen moments", robbed of the usual production or promotional hype, to the spectator.

These 'moments' are tentative, low key and uncertain of themselves as privileged subjects.

Geoff Weary lectures part time in film production at City Art Institute, Sydney.

## EXHIBITIONS AND SCREENINGS SINCE 1985.

- 1985      Perspecta '85 Art Gallery of NSW.  
Design for Living. Artspace. Curator: Ted Colless  
Close Remarks. Artspace. Curator: Gary Sangster.
- 1986      Follow the Sun. USA Programme. Curator: Mark Titmarsh.  
Traumraum Strasse, Berlin. Chauvel Cinema.  
Complexity and Contradiction at the Sushi Bar. Union Street Gallery.  
Kino Kapers. Aust National Gallery. Curator: Michael Desmond.
- 1987      Sydney Film Festival.  
Melbourne Film Festival.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Centre for the Arts Gallery,  
Hunter Street,  
Hobart.  
18 July - 9 August, 1987

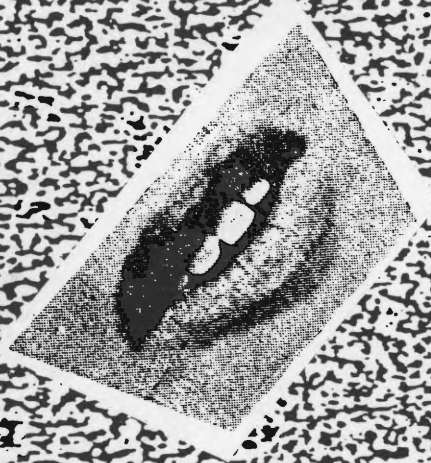
The Art Exhibitions Committee wish to thank the artists, Mary Scott, Meg Taylor and the following for their assistance:

This exhibition was assisted by a generous grant from the Visual Arts Board, Australia Council. The ongoing exhibitions programme of the University of Tasmania is greatly facilitated by a general purpose grant from the Tasmanian Arts Advisory Board.

Exhibition Curator	Geoff Parr
Catalogue essays	Edward Colless Ross Gibson Rob Horne Nancy Underhill
Catalogue design	Mary Scott
Photography	John Farrow
Poster design	Mary Scott
Typesetting	Photolith
Printing	Cox Kay Printers, Hobart

Catalogue published by the University of Tasmania, July, 1987

S501



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