



Dislocations

body • memory • place

National Gallery of Victoria Access Gallery
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Uncertain Positions

This exhibition explores the work of ten gay male artists. Although it deals with a cluster of specific thematic issues it is predicated on showing the diversity of their work rather than the somewhat arbitrary tendency to seek a unifying sensibility amongst gay artists.

Gay men present an interesting anomaly in the construction of sexuality and gender in society. We are *visible* as men and thus linked to dominant systems of patriarchal power but only in so far as our sexuality is kept *invisible*. Once seen as gay we quickly become identified with the marginalised, the other. This complex dynamic of both incorporation by and alienation from society frames the development of a gay man's world view.

This ambiguous position is reflected in the art world's reaction to the work of the artists gathered here. Although a number of the artists are well known and well regarded in the canon of contemporary art there has been little attempt to explore the collective body of their work or the relevance of homosexual identity to their art practice. This is in marked contrast to the proliferation of exhibitions and critical writing regarding gender and sexuality in women's art, for example. Even the recent *Eroticism Issue of Art and Australia* dealt only cursorily with homoeroticism preferring to deal with it in a deflected form through the Anzac myth rather than engage with its expression in the work of contemporary artists.

For many gay men the body is often perceived as a site of conflict. Particularly as a child and consequently as an adult through the prism of memory, the desiring of other men's bodies is experienced as both energising and problematic. This sense of awkwardness, fear, alienation or dislocation of the body from its desires has often expressed itself in the motif of the wounded or fractured body in gay men's art. The wounded body has more recently become a particularly poignant symbol for a devastating reality in this age of AIDS and escalating violence against gay men.

However the historic construction of homosexuality as "other", as marginalised, categorised and (dis)placed can lead not just to an awkward or troublesome dislocation from society but an active and creative disengagement from prevalent patterns of thought. Simon Watney's delineation of an 'AIDS activist aesthetic' as a "a guerilla semiotics on all fronts, threatening 'normality' with a long, sustained, deliberate derangement of its 'common sense'" could

also be applied to the development of a radical gay aesthetic.

Interestingly, but not untypically in terms of contemporary art practice, many of the artists in this exhibition are concerned with questioning the certainty of received traditions. This is particularly noticeable in a number of pieces where the iconic certainty of religious art is subverted or undercut in some way. In their position as outsider the dislocated or marginal observer is aware that there is not just one perspective on the world but that truth is intrinsically plural.

Juan Davila is well known for his strong and provocative statements about homosexuality, but constant attention to the shock value of Davila's images prevents an understanding of the complexity of his compositions with their multi-layered referencing of different cultures and art traditions. *Ex Votto* refers to a tradition of votive or invocational painting most common in the religious art of Latin America but also known in Europe. In times of personal sickness or national disaster a painting was commissioned which in its narrative displayed both the nature of the pestilence and the religious figure (usually the virgin) whose assistance was being invoked. In *Ex Votto*, the virgin has become an unflattering self portrait as a middle-aged, mutilated, transvestite Ganymede, as if to suggest that relief from the present disaster is in the power not of an external deity but in a confrontation with the shadow self. For Davila the power of the Ganymede figure in traditional myth and art history suggests a certain continuity across time of the young, well proportioned, white male as an exclusionary paradigm of homoerotic desire. Such images which abound in current gay commercial publishing and some HIV/AIDS campaigns are seen as "totalitarian" images which have the hegemonic power of religious icons.

Ex Votto shifts constantly between its invocation of high and pop culture, between the world of pornography and the world of classical myth, between commerce and spirituality, between the modernist and classical traditions of art history, between the interior and the landscape, between the cultures of Latin America, Australia and Europe and between masculine and feminine identities. Davila's refusal to define a unifying perspective from which to view the painting is not just a postmodernist cliché but a powerful statement about the fluid nature of sexual and cultural identity.

Mathew Jones work draws from both the strategies of conceptual minimalism and of activist art. Although Jones work resembles activist sloganeering, he eschews the didacticism of the rhetorical for a more fluid view of sexual identities and a more complex understanding of the polyvalent nature of visual/verbal sign systems. The name scrawled on the wall will be known to some and not to other viewers. Murley was acquitted in a recent trial which raised many questions about gay identity and codes of visibility and invisibility used, or thought to be used, by gay men. But the piece works irrespective of whether the story of the trial is known or unknown, because in the context of this show the graffiti becomes, an ambiguous mark, a sexualised invitation, which is as much about the entrancing anonymity of the subject as it is about his identity.

Luke Roberts extravagant canvases with their campy metaphysics and many attachments are visually luscious and full of ironic humour. Roberts grew up in the tiny outback Queensland town of Alpha. The Australian landscape and a search for an Australian myth are strong elements in his work - the deep organic orange of "Alpha dust" and rich desert sky blues are his characteristic colors. His alter-egos Pope Alice and St Luke of Alpha reflect his transformation of the Catholicism of his childhood into a series of uniquely personal emblems. *Exorcism I: Sky Painting/Inventing Infinity/The Festival Of Light* expresses Robert's characteristic tension between a search for absolute values and a fascination with the kitsch and temporal nature of the contemporary. For all its extravagance the painting has a sombre, almost funereal quality. The dismembered dolls act as signs of isolation within the vastness of the architectural/environmental grid of the painting, but the doll is also a perverse shamanistic accessory in Roberts' compote of spirituality. For Roberts the isolation of childhood is the crucible of an alchemic transformation which unleashes an adulthood in which transgressive behaviours become normative and secure because they have been so obsessively rehearsed in the privacy of the child's world.

Like Roberts Rod McLiesh is concerned to articulate a postmodern position about the contemporary absence of certainty. By the casual unframed placement of the simply drawn segments of *A Fall From Place* McLiesh draws attention to our unanchored position in an age which has outgrown any purely metaphysical understanding of reality. The computer generated figure, whose pixilated form also reminds us of the viral micro-organisms (dis)covered but not controlled nor fully explained by science, tumbles through a scene dominated by the icons of ancient Egyptian certainty.

Ross Moore's exploration of sexual and cultural traditions is complex. An interest in the body is explored through an individualistic adaptation of tribal iconography. In Moore's personal cosmology traditional divisions between the heavens and the underworld, between the body and the earth, between the modern and the primordial, between the conscious and the unconscious are disturbed. The distorted figures in *The Royal Tombs of Ur* can be read as embryonic or mummified forms, the jig saw of interlocking shapes is at once a clutter of limbs and organs and an inert landscape of stone, the central ominous tower has the ancient resonance of the phallus as well as the contemporaneity of science fiction.

At first the strong silent abstractions of Brent Harris seem only to celebrate the beauty of a minimalist aesthetic with little overt content little alone any gay content. Once identified with a metaphysical abstraction concerned with the transcendent he prefers now to talk of the psychological rather than the sacred. For Harris each form has psychological as well as material shape and a particular emotional resonance. His *Another Dead Bunny* can be read as an interesting contrast of organic and geometric shapes or as reference to the prevalence of death in the gay community as we confront AIDS. The series of silk screen prints, *Otherness*, are equivocal and may be read as either positive or negative shapes or as mercurial outlines whose contours constantly invert. These prints celebrate the oddity of their forms and here as in much of his work Harris seductively poses the question of difference.

Ross Watson's ability as a photo realist painter with a strong interest in the male figure and classical form has made his work popular amongst gay men. Although he is associated with a realist style Watson has always demonstrated an interest in surrealist imagery with unusual juxtapositioning of isolated objects creating a strong sense of the mysterious in his work. In this most recent work Watson gives us a realist detail through the view finder of a silhouette set against a simple under-worked backdrop. The richness of the regal and ecclesiastical imagery is framed by the shadow of the sexual. The intensity of that captured moment, that singular view, is contrasted with the decorative motifs and icons of the everyday which occupy the pale backgrounds. In this instance the isolation of a detail is not about objectification or limitation of the image it is about the distillation of its essential emotional power. This work speaks of the complexity of representing the body and how details can wake us to a deeper understanding of the whole - a phenomena on which both philosophers and fetishists would agree.

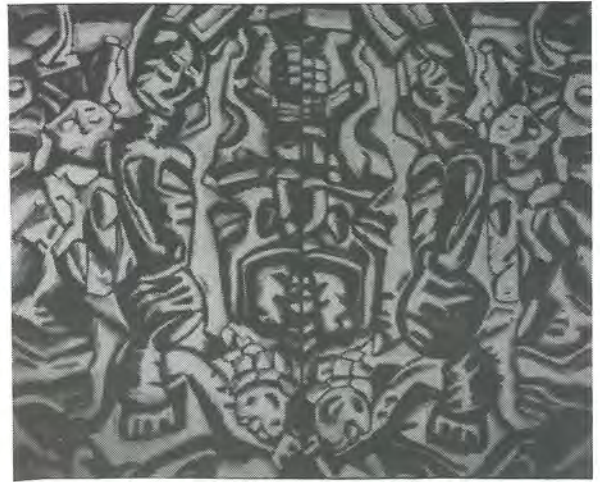
Ross T. Smith's fragile forms emerge out of a dense velvety surface of black and are subtly, almost subliminally toned in blues and purples. Like many post modern photographers there is a tension in Smith's work between an aesthetic of beauty (obvious in the lush quality of the prints) and ideas of temporality and fragility (equally obvious in the assemblage and the treatment of the image). At first sight his image of the pregnant female body may seem to have little to do with the stated concerns of this show however it serves as a potent symbol of the way the mother has been problematized and co-opted as part of the gay male body in the psychoanalytic discourse of homosexuality. In broad psychological terms he reminds us that our primary sense of dislocation is our displacement from the mother. The work as a whole deals with questions of mortality and has a melancholic air as it struggles to come to terms with the tenuousness of our grip on life.

Lex Middleton often uses re-photographed original video images in his multipanneled pieces. Video style is used generally as a metaphor for the contemporary but in particular as a symbol of the way sexuality is constructed by advertising and the electronic media. *Homage to the Quilt* takes its cue from the AIDS memorial quilt but unlike the quaint original panels with their roots in domestic and community art this highly technologically mediated statement has an emotive power which is at once sinister and sincere. The shadowy images of a shielded face are combined with the vibrancy of the floral motif which reminds us of the traditional wreath but in its saturated color and pixelation also strongly references the viral.

Simon Carver's *Is the Anus a Grave* is a simple but evocative statement about the pathologising of the gay male body in the age of AIDS. The raw earth, heaped anus like and red lipped amidst the clinically white cotton sheet and ceramic tiles, makes obvious reference to the current medicalisation of gay sexuality, however it also speak more generally of the tensions between the chaotic and the ordering aspects of desire.

Through a variety of formal structures each of the artists in the exhibition make individual but complementary statements about the body and a gay sense of otherness. The work shows a tentative mapping of a psychological space which is secure because it is claimed as one's own but is gladly without the assurance of certainty which stems from adherence to an absolute moral order.

Marcus O'Donnell
Curator



Ross Moore, *The Royal Tombs of Ur* 1986.
Oil on Linen



Ross Watson, *Self Series V (For my beloved Swan King)* 1992. Oil and mixed media on board

Cover Image: Juan Davila, *Ex Votto* 1992.
Oil on canvas