

Notes on Post Contemporary Painting

David M. Thomas

Painting has always been conceptual, but concepts are really just gossiping villagers and painting does better to ignore them. In fact, she hardly notices them and goes about pleasuring herself with no respect for the differentiation of public and private realms. Of course this means that sometimes they notice her and this becomes part of her pleasure - but only to the degree to which she can risk revealing to them how much she is manipulating them. [1]

This exhibition began two years ago as a discussion held long distance between myself, Tony Schwensen and Shane Haseman. At that time, each of us was living in a different capital city; Brisbane, Sydney and Melbourne respectively. The theme was 'Post Conceptual Art'. For me this spoke mostly of a dissatisfaction with 'project' oriented art that resisted change and a responsiveness to the outside world. Something in the world had shifted over the past three years, and this for me made 'Contemporary Art' seem somehow redundant. Its complicity in market driven, western industrialised capitalism certainly contributed to my ambivalence.

My personal situation had also shifted. I had moved to Brisbane. This had a profound effect on me. Among other things I became more aware of how each city in Australia has its own version of the contemporary art world, much like the Free Masons, all of them with their own neuroses and egocentrisms. An intended strategy to combat this mentality was to include artists from more than one or two cities and artists from overseas; in this case Rotterdam in the Netherlands. Also, most of the Australian artists in the exhibition have lived for some period in other cities, broadening their personal experiences and art practices and resisting the closed networks that inevitably arise in isolated Australian cities. This facilitated a wider perspective than a purely local survey could achieve.

Over the next year or so I also met writer and anthropologist Stephen Zagala and involved him in these discussions. Stephen had recently moved to Brisbane. I had met him before, both in Sydney and Melbourne and again significantly at the IMA. We got to talking about what we were doing and shared a similar attitude of ironic disaffection for institutionalised cultural activity. Eventually Stephen convinced me that 'Post Conceptual Painting' was an extension of an existing avant-gardist paradigm and that *Post Contemporary Painting*, with its absurdity and logical impossibility was a better title and thematic. Over a period of emailing back and forth, I agreed completely.

So why use the word paint at all? Many of the works in this exhibition do not use paint, others dance around the idea of painting, others satirise aspects of the act of painting while some treat the act and continued possibility with reverence. The idea is to try to include in one group exhibition many attitudes to an activity. Here I think we have thirteen.

The idea of painting is both very vague and extremely specific, both elusive and omnipresent. This has something to do with how the history of modern painting is conjoined and confused with the history of Modernism; used as a barometer of progress, negated by technological advance and then returned to, as one returns to mother for a nice hot meal.

Painting's attachment to Modern Art negates the fact that people have been painting on things and surfaces for tens of thousands of years. Presently people of all ages, in all kinds of cultures, make many types of marks on all kinds of flat supports. That is what people do, but most of this has very little, if anything, to do with what we understand to be Contemporary Art.

When painting, or viewing a painting, we have the allure, illusion and realisation of multiple lives. The practice of painting is a place where the individual is able, in conference with a shared understanding of what other artists have done, to make up a series of rules or a system of making work. And then, if one wants, to forget or deliberately break these rules. This is art, it is not biochemistry. You do not put lives at risk with an experimental painting.

In this way painting can exist as both a banal utility and as a form of extreme sublimation, sometimes even in the one object (as in a monochrome painting). Painting of this type is still considered by some to be the ultimate step of human expression. At the same time this kind of painting works effectively and economically to decorate and activate a cube-like gallery space.

Painting at once situates itself as a domestic decorative process and mutates itself through a spectrum of personal introspective processes. In my own work, as well as that of Paul Wrigley and Camilla Cassidy, a very personal view of images and cultural politics enter our respective studios and leaves filtered and reconfigured, often with multiple layers of poetic reference and association.

However in popular consciousness, painting is still thought of in narrower terms, as something that executes a singular mythology; providing two-dimensional representations of the world, pictorial narratives and figurative expressions. To me this seems a reductive view of painting and an opportunity wasted. When only one life is lived, when only one aspect of rendering or reading explored, for both the painter and the audience, this is like going through life only ever ordering the salad.

In this exhibition the paint in many cases may have no function and no other purpose but to act as a pointer. *'a finger pointing to the Moon, don't look at the finger or you will miss all the heavenly glory.'* [2]

Here, especially with the more conceptually oriented artists such as Bibo, and Robert Pulie, paint stands in for itself. In Bibo's *Colour Plan: Painting 1, Wheat Paddock*, the painting is, as Bibo put it, 'a proposal'. This alludes to a desire to design public spaces, such as airports; places where people transport themselves, but also where they come into contact with one another and communicate. This particular piece has moved Bibo from the Netherlands to Australia on two separate occasions; Kellerberrin in Western Australia in 2002 and on this occasion to Brisbane. This is the painting's power.

But painting is also a wily creature, as Robert Pulie reminds us in his *Post Painting Exercise*. As an introduction to this work, which features small mobile goal posts, Pulie quotes from the painting contractor of the Melbourne Cricket Ground: "*Before any points can be scored, the posts must first be painted*". With these works, painted roughly in their mobile state, Pulie literally and metaphorically points out the goal posts of painting are, indeed, endlessly moving. We are also reminded of our society's need for clear winners and losers in all fields of endeavour, including, of

course, painting. The proliferation of painting prizes is a clear testament to this concern, and Pulie's work demonstrates the apparent absurdity of this approach to cultural life.

Found, borrowed and made objects have been used in PCP in a manner that surely finds its licence in the history of modern art, as with Catherine Brown's *Round and Round* installation of growing plants and flowers. This connects us through a shared desire and experience of these phenomenon, objects and historic information to her own private fixations and desires.

In the works of Shane Haseman we are given a lesson from art history but the history has been literally 're-membered' and used to make new, very personal, idiosyncratic works in video and collage.

If Haseman confronts us in an airport vestibule for debriefing by video and diagrams, Diena Georgetti invites us to a play in her grandiose home theatre. Here, Georgetti's works, such as *The Humanity of Abstract Painting*, evoke easel painting and are camouflaged by the conventions of the art museum, from the ornate frames to the theatrical lighting

The history and practice of painting is rich with possibilities and unresolved problems. These offerings wait like hot scones on the counter anticipating the return of the prodigal multi-media artist.

In his sculpture *Elegy to the Australian Republic (Motherwell Avoid Relegation)*. Tony Schwensen draws a line in the sand, through the placement of his work down the middle of the gallery, designating the field of play. His work becomes the net in a skewed game of aesthetic volleyball. Again we are reminded, that this exhibition is about more than a singular media-based approach to art.

In his work, *Moonflower*, Paul Bai notes a particular anthropological schism of openings at the IMA: people cannot smoke in the gallery so they go outside and view what's happening in the gallery through the large glass windows. *Moonflower* takes the form of a curtain, decorated with large flowers drawn in felt pen (the readymade version of ink and pen), which has been hung across this voyeuristic threshold. In order to view the full work, the curtains must be drawn across the window, but Bai has left them pushed to the sides. It's a contrary work.

In the same way that Bai domesticates the exhibition space, which has been purpose built as a cold container for contemporary art, Jason Markou confronts us with perverse decorative intent. As both an artist and a gallerist, Markou is aware, in a way that most artists and people never are, about the shortcomings of the art gallery experience. With this intimate understanding of contemporary art and the zeal of a true fan, Markou at once acknowledges, integrates and forgets every image from every catalogue and exhibition he has ever seen, disregarding boundaries between painting, installation and sculpture.

In an overt and theatrical manner, Guy Benfield returns to the kitchen of painting grinding his teeth, as if on Angel Dust and ready to collaborate with Lamont Young on a new chapter of *The Tortoise, His Dreams and Journeys*. [3] Guy represents what's great about the old school of Modernism. He remembers contemporary art history the way it probably was in the seventies, not how, for the most part, it has been represented by either its documenters, archivists, publicists or detractors.

PCP also deals with the expectations that we share about art. Some of these might be: an art object should be made from paint ; artists are painters that work in a studio for eight hours a day and then go to a cafe and talk about themselves, and little else; the creative act is somehow a sanctified act filled with divine intervention and that art museums and exhibitions are for the enlightenment of an under-educated audience. Moreover, that the experience of seeing contemporary artwork will change you in some way and that a transformative effect will and should occur with some immediacy. I have my own doubts about these ideas as did American artist, Mike Kelley, whom I seem to remember saying: "*Too much is always expected of art and love*".

I would paraphrase this to read: too much and too little are always expected of art, love and paint.

[1] Robert Pulie 2003 (*original statement for this exhibition when previously entitled, Post Conceptual Painting*)

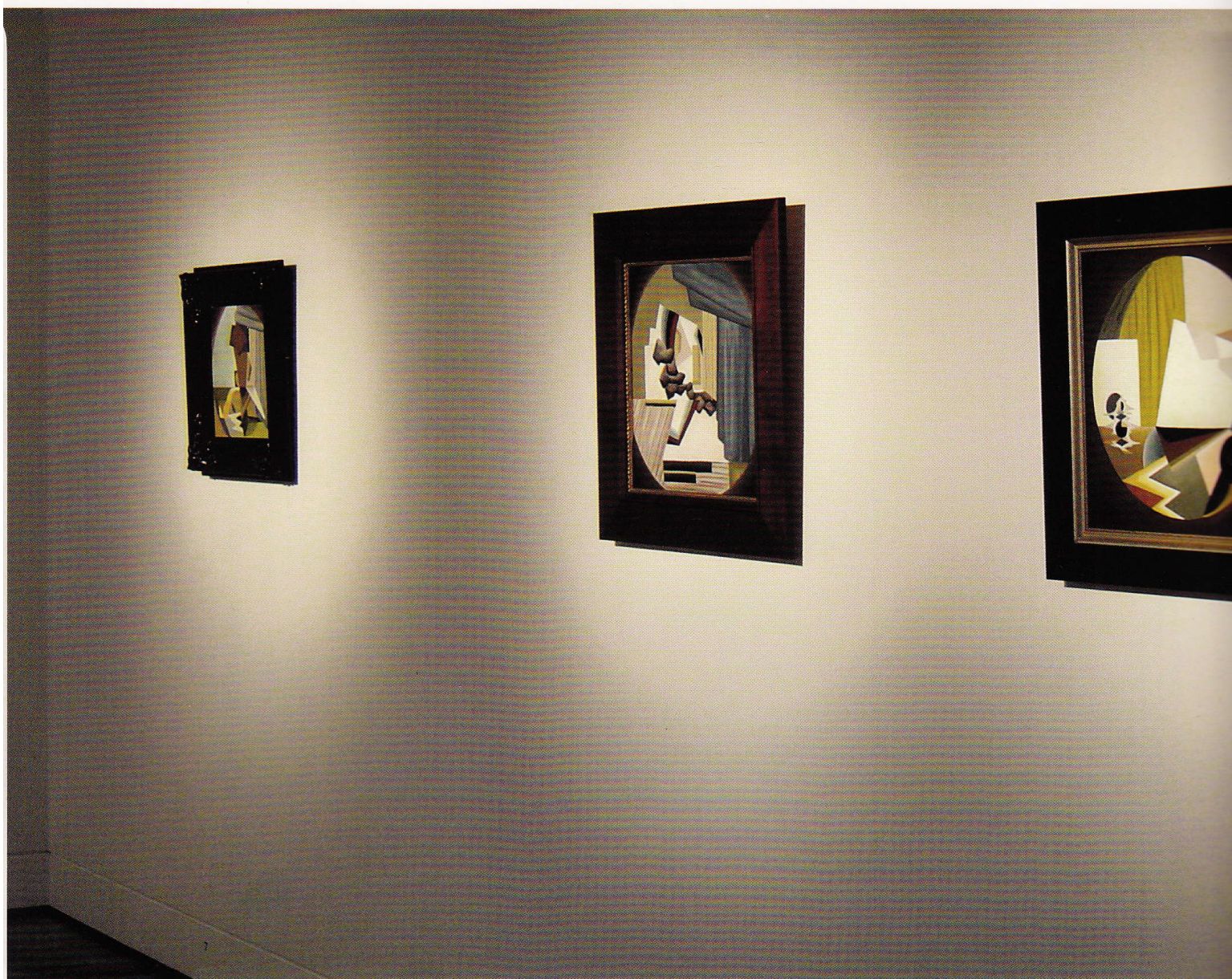
[2] Bruce Lee in *Enter the Dragon*, 1973.

[3] La Monte Young's long, collaborative performances such as *The Tortoise His Dreams and Journeys* are characterised by a repetitive, ritualistic, cult-like quality and are based on the establishment of a drone and the use of precise audio tones. See page 141, Michael Nyman, *Experimental Music, Cage and Beyond*, Cambridge University Press, 1999. Also note the photograph on page 142.

David M. Thomas is an artist and musician who lives and works in Brisbane.

Diana Georgetti

Lives and Works in Brisbane



Installation view, from left to right:

The Humanity of Abstract Painting, oil on canvas, 47 x 47 cm, 2002.

You, me and everything until we've passed away, oil on canvas, 59 x 59 cm, 2004.

A future where objects become our companions, oil on canvas, 54 x 54 cm, 2004.



The Humanity of Abstract Painting, oil on canvas, 47 x 47 cm, 2002. (Private Collection)