THE VALUE OF WEALTH: REPRESENTING CONTEMPORARY CORPORATE SPACE

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Proposal

THE VALUE OF WEALTH: REPRESENTING CONTEMPORARY CORPORATE SPACE

The objective of my research is to develop a body of work for exhibition based on an examination of the ways that corporate space, as exemplified by the foyers and conference rooms of contemporary corporate offices, reflect societal anxieties about wealth and power. These works will draw on the history of painting, with particular reference to 17th century Dutch still life painting, as a framework within which to conduct the exploration of contemporary space. This will be done by applying or interpreting the principles, motifs and techniques used in that period in the visual representation of the connection between wealth and decadence and western culture’s ambiguous attitude towards the creation and accumulation of wealth.

Boardrooms, corporate foyers and office interiors have developed into instantly recognisable types of space with a particular atmosphere, typified by large empty space and the use of materials such as marble and granite and surfaces with reflective finishes. These spaces are often open to the public, but the intention is for people to be impressed by the wealth and power of the occupants, an idea initially perfected in Ancient Rome. The impression of wealth and power created in these spaces is balanced against a need to demonstrate prudence and restraint – the corporations need to avoid creating an impression of extravagance or wastefulness.

The emergence of the genre still life painting in the Netherlands during the 17th century provides useful source material for their representations of restrained prosperity as well as the moral content related to the virtues of modesty and the transience of material life and wealth. The paintings of this period were numerous and varied, even within the broad genre of still life. In this project I am referencing the “breakfast” still lifes of Pieter Claesz and Willem Heda, typical of the early 17th century rather than the more ostentatious show pieces or “pronk” still life paintings which emerged later. Also of particular interest for this project are paintings featuring hunted game and animals by artists such as Weenix, d’Hondecoeter, Valkenberg and Shrieck which touch on the relationship between humans and the natural world as well as using animals for symbolic and allegorical purposes. The illusory space in the church interiors of Saenredam and de Witte, with their sense of expansive space and light, are echoed in the real space of contemporary corporate foyers and provide a basis for considering the format, composition and modes of representation of constructed space.

Initially my studio based research will comprise producing paintings representing certain lighting schemes, uses of materials and spatial strategies commonly used in corporate architecture and design. I will use representations of corporate space in cinema and popular culture to draw out the features which designate a space as ‘corporate’. The sense of alienation and dehumanisation in emblematic corporate spaces, has been explored through the works of Thomas Demand, Hannah Starkey and Craig Kalpakjian. Overall I am seeking to investigate visually how the design of contemporary corporate space seeks to simultaneously demonstrate wealth and reassure the public that the wealth is not associated with extravagance, decadence and corruption.
The project will culminate in a series of paintings which draw on the aesthetic conventions of seventeenth century Dutch still life paintings in order to investigate the aesthetic conventions of contemporary corporate space

OBJECTIVES:

The major objective of this research project is to produce paintings which apply the conventions of seventeenth century Dutch still life painting to the aesthetics of corporate space. I will find and photograph spaces with characteristics that make them identifiably corporate. I will then use these images to create works which illustrate and emphasize the qualities which make them identifiable as corporate and which highlight the way that these characteristics convey meaning.

AIMS:

- conduct an exploration of seventeenth century Dutch still life painting on the topics of wealth and architecture in order to understand the conventions, techniques and language used to address those issues
- establish what the characteristic features of corporate spaces are
- find and document locations with characteristics which identify them as corporate
- create works which apply lessons from seventeenth century Dutch still life painting to articulate and illustrate the meanings in contemporary corporate space.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS:

- What can I appropriate from Dutch still life painting of the 17th century, with particular reference to game still lifes, vanitas and breakfast pieces of the early 17th century, in order to translate the archetypal forms and atmospheres of contemporary corporate space, especially corporate foyers and conference rooms?
- How can aspects of the historical treatment of the theme of wealth (and the dangers of excess) in painting be applied to paintings today in order to examine these themes?

LOCATION:

Paintings will be executed in the RMIT City Campus studio and in my private studio. Other relevant work places will be: field excursions to gather visual data, i.e. to sketch and photograph, exhibitions and if possible, research trips to view both paintings and corporate architecture.
CONCLUSION

This research project will result in an exhibition of works which, by referring to 17th century Dutch art, make the aesthetic conventions of contemporary corporate space visible and prompt questions about the relationship of the corporation to wealth and power.

Rationale:

“...the Dutch mind [was] adrift between the fear of the deluge and the hope of moral salvage, in the tidal ebb and flow between worldliness and homeliness, between the gratification of appetite and its denial, between the conditional consecration of wealth and perdition in its surfeit.”

(Schama 1997)

The corrupting influence of wealth is an ancient theme, recurring through ancient Greek texts, Roman histories and biblical references: the devil makes work for idle hands. A perceived immorality of extravagance is readily apparent in Corporate architecture and design. It was also particularly apparent in the visual culture of 17th century Holland - the wealthiest society of the time and also a society and culture which in many ways closely resembles the current situation in liberal Western democracies.

Multinational corporations in the late 20th century have become the wealthiest entities in our society. Over the 20th century a consistent visual language has developed that can be labelled and recognised as 'corporate'. Embedded in that visual language is a treatment of the issue of wealth/waste – how to demonstrate the former without being charged with the latter.

The Netherlands in the 17th century was a society with a high level of wealth, driven in no small part by the activities of the world’s first multinational corporation – the Dutch East India Company (VOC). The art of the period frequently contains motifs referring to transience of material wealth and the sinfulness of excess. This provides an opportunity to compare how the treatment of this theme which emerges at moments of history where there is an ‘embarrassment of riches’ as Schama describes the 17thC Dutch economy’ can be applied to the treatment of similar concerns in corporate space today.

The buoyancy of the art market reflected the wealth of the period. This was a pre-industrial society and throw-away consumable goods were not able to be produced en-masse to create and sustain a level of demand. Instead a great deal of money was spent on more permanent consumer items including art. In the reformist and Calvinist churches decorations and indicators of material wealth - the papist idolatry - were removed altogether, leaving the comparatively empty, white walled spaces epitomised by Saenredam's paintings. Still life paintings of the period contains frequent references to the transitory nature of man’s existence and the temporary status of material wealth. Still life paintings
were loaded with symbolic references to mortality, wealth and corruption: - skulls, bubbles, spoiling luxury food, hunted game animals displayed as morbid trophies.

This ambiguous attitude towards wealth is echoed in contemporary society. The most wealthy entities now are not individual merchants or traders but the multinational corporations who represent and (dis)embody their interests. Liberal Western democracies are dependent on these corporations and their continued growth is celebrated by political leaders and the popular press. However the wealth of the corporation is also a source of anxiety – a concern played out in films such as The Bank, Cipher, Robocop and various Bond movies. Wealth, and the single minded pursuit of wealth is seen as a corrupting and malign influence.

The fact that the modern model of the corporation – with directors and shareholders developed in 17th century Holland is significant – as in 17th century Dutch culture, it is still seen as somewhat immoral for an individual to accumulate wealth. A corporation is a convenient way to side step this issue since it is ‘disembodied’ and serves to distance the individual from the wealth.

The architecture of the 1950’s and 60’s was seen as a very positive embodiment of rapid modernisation and the capitalist realisation of the American Founding Fathers’ Puritan ideals of worth through work. ‘For their clients as well as for many observers, these “glass boxes,” as they were often called, symbolized a new era—one of technical and organizational supremacy in the world, of enlightened management, and of economic growth.’ (The Organizational Complex: Architecture, Media, and Corporate Space, Reinhold Martin.)

Corporate spaces are consciously designed to achieve the effect of enhancing the status of the corporation (especially spaces like corporate foyers). Some of the elements of corporate design have become standard: The features which make a space identifiable as ‘corporate’: the ubiquitous halogen down-lights in meeting rooms, brushed steel lift doors, polished beech boardroom tables and expanses of polished stone are now so common that they are virtually un-noticed.

The purpose of my research is investigate how aesthetics of corporate space convey attitudes towards wealth and power using the conventions and principles of seventeenth century Dutch still life painting as a frame of reference. The theme of wealth, power and morality frequently recurred in Dutch art and the principles of accurately describing space, portraying things and so making them known can be usefully applied to the process of depicting corporate space. My work will contribute to a greater understanding of how standard design features in corporate space serve to construct meanings.
Methods:

In the course of the project I will:

1 Produce representational paintings on the themes of wealth, power and the corporation which draw on the visual language of Dutch painting. This will include testing compositional structure, themes, techniques and colour as used by artists of that period. I will also explore the extent to which Dutch painting used symbolism and metaphor to convey meaning as opposed to literal representation. This investigation will inform the extent to which corporate design relies on signifiers to convey meaning as opposed to the phenomenological effects of the spaces.

2 Produce paintings drawing on the depiction of corporate spaces in popular culture and films in which corporations play a prominent role, and in which corporate design conventions are used as signifiers.

Timeline:

Stage 1 (2005)

- Gallery/Museum research: relevant artists, their subject matter, use of compositional techniques.
- Attend National Gallery of Victoria exhibition “Dutch Masters from the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam”
- Attend National Gallery of Victoria symposium on Dutch art (25 June 2005) to build up understanding of techniques and conventions of Dutch art.
- Investigate works of artists such as; de Hooch, ter Borch, Saenredams, Vermeer, Metsu, Dou, Heda, Hoogstraten, Steen.
- Research depiction of corporate space in visual arts by artists such as Kalpakjian, Starkey, Opie, Demand.
- Research depiction of corporate space in cinema, advertising and popular culture.
- Determine what features define a space as ‘corporate’.
- Research compositional techniques employed by painters to depict space, light, to convey meaning and atmosphere in locations.
- Record images from various locations, through photography and sketches to create a visual database which will serve as source material for my paintings.
- Preliminary studio based work - paintings, photographic works. Experimentation with various painting methods including; gridding, monochromatic and limited palette colour systems, masking.

Stage 2 (2006)

- Evaluation of collected data to determine images which best accord with genre styles.
- Continued investigation into pertinent artists’ works.
- Continued collection of visual data from field excursions; photographs, sketches.
- Production of paintings, sketches of selected images, finished photographs, emergence of first major works.
Stage 3 (2007)

- Continued collection of visual data from field excursions, continued studio experimentation with collected images.
- Continue major works- paintings, photographic works.
- Plan exhibition
- Initial selections for final submission.

Stage 4 (Jan to Dec 2008)

- Study trip to Europe, including Amsterdam, to study seventeenth century Dutch paintings
- Continue and complete major works, paintings, photographic works, with consideration as to their final display.
- Catalogue and Document visual works for durable visual record.
- Plan and organize exhibition.
- Completion of all works and final selection for exhibition.
- Complete documentation of visual works.
- Completed collation of all relevant work for durable visual record.
- Realization of exhibition.

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Hochstrasser, J. Still Life and Trade in the Dutch Golden Age, Yale University Press, 2007

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Mandel, O. The Cheerfulness of Dutch Art: A rescue operation Davaco, Doornspijk, 1996


Schama, S. An Embarrassment of Riches: Dutch culture in the 17th century, 1997


Willis, C. Form follows finance : skyscrapers and skylines in New York and Chicago, Princeton Architectural Press, 1995

Wollheim, R “More than Meets the Eye” in Modern Painters, Winter 1999, vol 12, no.4 pp.68-72
Research Photos of Corporate Spaces and Preliminary Paintings
the Lift at Spacement, 2005, installation

Lift painting 3, 2005, oil on aluminium 60cm x 120xcm
Lift at St Maurice, 2005, oil on linen, 20cm x 35cm
Foyer at St Maurice, 2005, oil on linen 20cm x 35cm
Paintings
Dividendgame, 2005, oil and resin on linen, 35cm x 25cm
Arcadia, 2006, oil on linen, 107cm x 67cm
Pro Pelle Cutem, 2006, oil on linen, 107cm x 67cm
Res Development, 2006, oil on linen, 107cm x 67cm
Arrow, 2006, oil and resin on linen, 25cm x 25cm
Corner, 2006, oil and resin on linen, 35cm x 25cm
Depress Button, 2006, oil and resin on linen, 35cm x 25cm
Foyer, 2006, oil and resin on linen, 35cm x 25cm
Cave Cricket, 2006, oil and resin on linen, 25cm x 35cm
Chevron, 2006, oil and resin on linen, 25cm x 35cm
AWB, 2006, oil and resin on linen, 35cm x 25cm
Insect Loves LED, 2006, oil and resin on linen, 25cm x 25cm
Ptarmigan, 2006, oil and resin on linen, 35cm x 25cm
Err, 2006, oil and resin on linen, 35cm x 25cm
Helmut, 2006, oil and resin on linen, 35cm x 25cm
SPQR, 2007, oil and resin on linen, 35cm x 25cm
G skull, 2007, oil and resin on linen, 35cm x 25cm
U, 2007, oil and resin on linen, 35cm x 25cm
Head Up, 2007, oil and resin on linen, 35cm x 25cm
P, 2007, oil and resin on linen, 35cm x 25cm
Umbra, 2007, oil and resin on linen, 35cm x 25cm
Peacock Going Up, oil on linen, 2007, 107cm x 67cm
Duck and Button, 2007, oil and resin on linen, 35cm x 25cm
Golden Lion, oil on linen, 2007, 35cm x 25cm
Tu Quoque, 2007, oil and resin on copper, 30cm x 20cm
Margin Hare, 2007, oil and resin on copper, 30cm x 20cm
Hirsuta, 2007, oil and resin on wood, 35cm x 25cm
Margin Partridge, 2007, oil and resin on wood, 35cm x 25cm
Goose with Dome, 2007, oil and resin on wood, 35cm x 25cm
Locus Solus, 2007, oil and resin on wood, 35cm x 25cm
Triplicate, 2007, oil and resin on wood, 35cm x 25cm
Swipe Finch, 2007, oil and resin on wood, 35cm x 25cm
IO, 2007, oil and resin on wood, 35cm x 25cm
Skeleton, oil and resin on wood, 25cm x 35cm
Quod Perdidit Optat 1, 2007, oil and resin on wood, 20cm x 30cm
Quod Perdit Optat 2, 2007, oil and resin on wood, 20cm x 30cm
Goltzius_Whale, 2007, oil on linen, 95cm x 135cm
Podia, 2007, oil and resin on wood, 25cm x 35cm
Company of Monkeys, 2007, oil on linen, 135cm x 95cm
Footless Peacock, 2007, oil on linen, 135cm x 95cm
Pedestal Skull, 2007, oil and resin on wood, 35cm x 25cm
Floor Skull, 2007, oil and resin on wood, 35cm x 25cm
Security Camera Bird, 2007, oil and resin on wood, 35cm x 25cm
Albino groundhog skin hat, 2007, oil and resin on copper, 30cm x 20cm
Chevron group, 2007, oil and resin on wood, 35cm x 25cm
Chimeric pheasant partridge, 2007, oil and resin on wood, 35cm x 25cm
Platonia deer, oil and resin on copper, 2007, 30cm x 20cm
Pig Rabbit Rat, 2007, oil and resin on wood, 35cm x 25cm
Neanderthal, 2007, oil and resin on wood, 25cm x 35cm
Lambda Butterfly, 2007, oil and resin on wood, 30cm x 45cm
Des Esseintes tortoise, 2007, oil and resin on wood, 30cm x 45cm
Albino Peacock, 2008, oil and resin on wood, 30cm x 45cm
Puffer with sputnik, oil and resin on copper, 2007, 30cm x 20cm
Albino Wallaby gamma sigma, 2008, oil and resin on wood, 35cm x 25cm
Domes, oil and resin on copper, 2008, 30cm x 20cm
Albino Swift Docking Sputnik, 2008, oil and resin on copper, 30cm x 20cm
Wallaby with Arrow, 2008, oil and resin on wood, 30cm x 45cm
Mother Birds 1a, 2008, oil and resin on copper, 30cm x 20cm
Mother Birds 1b, 2008, oil and resin on copper, 30cm x 20cm
Mother Birds 2a, 2008, oil and resin on copper, 30cm x 20cm
Mother Birds 2b, 2008, oil and resin on copper, 30cm x 20cm
Mother Birds, 2008, oil and resin on copper, 30cm x 20cm
Albino Crocodile, 2008, oil on linen, 135cm x 95cm
Koala1, 2008, oil and resin on wood, 30cm x 45cm
Koala2, 2008, oil and resin on wood, 30cm x 45cm
Albino Wallabies, 2008, oil on linen, 135cm x 95cm
Drongo on Deathstar, 2008, oil and resin on wood, 35cm x 25cm
Duck, 2008, oil and resin on wood, 35cm x 25cm
Granrojo, 2008, oil and resin on wood, 30cm x 45cm
George Grattan, oil and resin on copper, 2008, 30cm x 20cm
Marie Sabina, oil and resin on copper, 2008, 30cm x 20cm
Tatias, oil and resin on copper, 2008, 30cm x 20cm
Magpie crash, oil and resin on copper, 2008, 30cm x 20cm
Rosella crash, oil and resin on copper, 2008, 30cm x 20cm
Peacock Observes Sputnik, 2008, oil on linen, 135cm x 95cm
Ouroboros stoats, 2008, oil and resin on wood, 35cm x 25cm
Ouroboros stoats, 2008, oil and resin on wood, 35cm x 25cm
Singularity, 2008, oil and resin on wood, 30cm x 45cm
Cosmotron, oil and resin on copper, 2008, 30cm x 20cm
Cryomoderator, oil and resin on copper, 2008, 30cm x 20cm
Neuromasts, 2008, oil and resin on wood, 35cm x 25cm

Beetle Fight, 2008, oil and resin on wood, 25cm x 35cm
Wallabies, 2008, oil and resin on wood, 35cm x 25cm
Stoat Fight, 2008, oil and resin on wood, 25cm x 35cm
Mastodons, 2008, oil and resin on wood, 25cm x 35cm
Parakeet (t) vs parakeet (b), 2008, oil and resin on wood, 35cm x 25cm
Puffer and robot arm, 2008, oil and resin on wood, 35cm x 25cm
Space Race, 2008, oil and resin on wood, 35cm x 25cm
Dissection, 2008, oil and resin on wood, 35cm x 25cm
Divergence, 2008, oil and resin on wood, 25cm x 35cm
Intersection, 2008, oil and resin on wood, 25cm x 35cm
Koalas, 2008, oil and resin on wood, 35cm x 25cm
Hybrid, 2008, oil and resin on wood, 25cm x 35cm
Hybrid2, 2008, oil and resin on wood, 25cm x 35cm
Peacock robot arm, 2008, oil and resin on wood, 25cm x 35cm
Magpies, 2008, oil and resin on wood, 35cm x 25cm
Probability, 2008, oil and resin on wood, 35cm x 25cm
Totem, 2008, oil and resin on wood, 45cm x 30cm
Curriculum Vitae

Born Adelaide, 1973

Education
2004 Honours Fine Art (Painting), RMIT University
2003 Bachelor of Fine Arts (Painting), RMIT University
1993 Bachelor of Economics, Adelaide University

Solo Shows
2008 Holotypes, Nellie Castan Gallery, Melbourne
Negentrophies, Sullivan and Strumpf Fine Art, Sydney
2007 Unnatural Selection, Peter Walker Fine Art, Adelaide
The Spoils, Nellie Castan Gallery, Melbourne
2006 Familia Kapitaal, Michael Carr, Sydney
2005 The Lift, Spacement, Melbourne
The Longed For Departure, Bus Gallery, Melbourne

Group Shows (selected)
2008
Optimism, Gallery of Modern Art, Brisbane
Neo Goth: Back in Black, UQ Art Museum
Heat: Art and the Environment, RMIT Gallery, Melbourne
Bal Tashchit: Thou Shalt Not Destroy, Jewish Museum of Australia, Melbourne
Archibald Prize Finalists Touring Exhibition
SSFA08, Sullivan and Strumpf Fine Art, Sydney
2007 Momento Mori, Blkmrkt, Brisbane
Eutick Memorial Still Life Award, Coffs Habour
Sincerity of Detail, Wardlow Studios, Melbourne
Metro 5 Finalists, Touring Exhibition
Archibald Prize Finalists Touring Exhibition
2006 Metro 5 Finalists Show, Metro 5, Melbourne
Melbourne Reign, Michael Carr Gallery, Sydney
8, RMIT Faculty Gallery, Melbourne
Commonwealth Games Village, Melbourne
2002 Melbourne Fringe Festival: Installation, Franco Cozzo, Brunswick

Prizes and Awards
2008 Archibald Prize, Finalist, NSW Art Gallery, Sydney
2007 First Prize, Eutick Memorial Still Life Award, Coffs Habour, NSW
Shortlisted, Stan & Maureen Duke Art Prize, Gold Coast City Art Gallery, Qld
Winner, Siemens Scholarship & Aquisitive Art Award, Melbourne
Archibald Prize, Finalist, NSW Art Gallery, Sydney
2006 Geelong Gallery Fletcher Jones Contemporary Art Prize

Curriculum Vitae (cont’d)

Judges Prize, Metro5 Gallery, Melbourne
2005 Shortlisted, Siemens Art Prize, Melbourne
2004 Shortlisted, Siemens Art Prize, Melbourne

Collections
La Trobe University
Coffs Harbour Regional Gallery, Coffs Harbour, NSW
Geelong Art Gallery, Geelong, Victoria
Siemens Australia
Artbank Australia
Private Collections in Australia, Europe and the USA

Publications (selected)
C. Miller, Varnished Truths, exhibition catalogue 2008
M. Amore & A. Crawford, Let There be Life, exhibition catalogue, April 2008
C. Lumbie, Two Speed, Australian Art Collector, January 2008
A. Crawford, Hunters & Collectors, Australian Art Collector, January 2008
S. Haley, Holotypes, exhibition catalogue, May 2008
S. Smee, Put on a Happy Face, The Australian, February 29, 2008
Sunday Arts, ABC TV, March 2008
K. Strickland, Animal Focus is Dead Right, The Australian Financial Review, November 2007
J. McDonald, A Palette of Local Colour Sydney Morning Herald Spectrum, November 2007
Introducing Sam Leach, Adelaide Advertiser, November 2007
A. Kylie, Paint it Black, Vogue Living, September 2007
A. Crawford, Freeing the Corpse from the Corporate, the Age, June 2007
P. Ellis, The Spoils, exhibition catalogue, June 07
A. Crawford, 50 Most Collectable Artists, Art Collector, January 07
Critical Feedback
Varnished Truths

Carrie Miller (ex. Cat)

It’s little more than a truism to say that Sam Leach’s exquisitely rendered paintings of animals are beautiful.

But they’re more than simply beautiful representations of nature – they’re also allusions to what such representations can reveal about our own natures.

Look beneath the dark, lacquered surfaces of these pictures and you’ll see that those noble, life-like creatures inhabiting Leach’s work are often dead – the likely result of human intervention.

This less than beautiful truth isn’t depicted directly – in keeping with the Dutch still-life tradition it references, the subject matter remains in a state of animated suspension, hermetically-sealed in resin, and immune to the threat of decay.

Instead it’s through the repertoire of creatures Leach chooses to display and where he chooses to display them that we glean the truth of what we are looking at. Game animals such as hares and pheasants, conventional symbols of the wealth and abundance of the propertied elite who shot them, an exotic butterfly that looks like a ready-made museum exhibit, a group of monkeys, the favoured subjects of science experiments, inhabit soulless corporate interiors – “spiritual vacuums” in the artist’s terms.

Leach ambiguously juxtaposes his memento moris – traditional reminders of death – with subtle references to the futile desire for immortality that drives “progress” in contemporary capitalist society (itself driven by an obsessive fear of death) to remind us of the duality of such progress: our indiscriminate accumulation of more truth, more knowledge and more wealth has given with the one hand and taken with the other, his paintings suggest.

Beyond simple representations of nature for us to appreciate then, these works are also meditations on the complex ways we are implicated in the natural world and the way we construct ourselves in relation to it. In short, they reveal the paradoxical relationship we have to nature itself: our respect for it and desire to preserve it is suggested by Leach’s careful labour with his subject matter, yet this is intrinsically wedded to the destructive ways in which we intervene in it: the use of animals for decoration and display for example.

These little paintings certainly trade in some big and pressing issues – yet they are not overt political statements or preachy morality tales. Indeed, the remarkable thing about Leach’s work is the refined way the obvious intelligence behind its execution does not diminish its beauty. Like his paintings, the conceptual concerns of this artist are at once considered yet unencumbered. It could be said that Leach’s practice realises the kind of fine calibration you might find in nature.
Freeing the corpse from the corporate
Ashley Crawford

The Age, 13/06/07

Sam Leach’s paintings feel dark and claustrophobic, not least because he’s just escaped the clutches of the Tax Office, writes Ashley Crawford.

THE Australian Taxation Office can drive a lot of people crazy. In the case of Sam Leach, it drove him to painting. Like many who leave university, Leach took the first job available to him, in the ATO, and ended up as an overseer in a forecasting and management branch.

But the strict hours and the dehumanising aspects of office work were all too apparent. Escape came via a part-time art class, and it didn’t take long for those around him to realise there was a real talent in their midst.

Leach’s love of painting, his relentless curiosity and his loathing of corporate structure are all readily apparent in his latest exhibition, The Spoils, at Nellie Castan Gallery. Inspired in part by the classical tradition of still-life painting from the Dutch painters of the 17th century, Leach transfers his meticulously rendered corpses of ducks, starlings and hares into the 21st century. This transferral is far from overt; the viewer has to look closely to spot the hints of LED lights or the illuminated floor numbers in a lift.

What attracts many viewers to these paintings is the exquisite, glowing surfaces that Leach builds.

While his work has a strong conceptual basis, the ideas behind the paintings have to be balanced with hard work, he says.

"I think there has, at least to some extent, been a demise in the interest in postmodernist concerns and critical theory," he says. "I think people are going back to asking whether there is a metaphysical truth that can be grasped in art."

Leach himself came from an artistic background of what he calls "conceptual and minimal intervention," influenced in part by his teachers at RMIT, and he rejects the view that much postmodern posturing was a case of the emperor's new clothes. "I'd hesitate to say that, because some of it was great!

"But the amount of time I put into the paintings is in some ways a reaction to commercialisation, mass production and the totalitarianism of corporate culture. Some of this comes from my experience in the tax department. Some of that was interesting, but it is the very notion of organisational culture that I suppose I am questioning."

Leach has only been working full-time on his art for 18 months, and the leap from office to studio was unnerving. "It's doing in my brain, I'm not used to the freedom and you have to step up and confront that."

The dramatic change of lifestyle was also shaken by the fact that Leach's wife had also left work to have a child. The security of a wage, rigid hours and a suit and tie went out the window. "The cost of freedom is the loss of security, which is frightening," Leach says. "If you step out of line, you lose the lot."

But in many respects Leach's timing was perfect. A strong return to both painting and figuration has been proliferating, and Leach fits in well. He quotes such peers as Tony Lloyd, Amanda Marburg, Juan Ford, Stephen Bush, David Noonan, Chris Bond and the younger Jackson Slattery as artists in whose company he feels comfortable.
"It's interesting talking to a lot of younger guys. It's not just painting that has returned with a force, but that figurative, representational element."

Leach admits that there have been many disasters in the studio, but there is also excitement when a painting goes in the right direction. "A moment occurs when something exists as its own entity . . . it takes on its own life."

"Good art should really be like a machine for generating ideas," he says. "Just as in the world of science a particle accelerator is not designed to simply demonstrate a phenomenon, but to actually create new knowledge. Of course ideas go into the work, but art is really exciting when new and unexpected things result."

But that sense of spontaneity is balanced by gruelling hours in the studio. A small painting can take more than 20 hours to complete. "There's often a criticism about figurative works that the artist is trying too hard, but I respond to the notion of hard work. I have the utmost intention of achieving the best result - I don't want to paint comfortably within my own limits."

Leach's miniscule studio is littered with reference material for his paintings, including a very real human skull, but he admits that he also utilises reproductions of 17th-century Dutch masters. "The main reason is to get inside what they do in terms of what their intention was. There are two strands of thought: the first is that it is a symbolic, allegorical reference to mortality. The second is that it is simply scientific observation. I believe it is actually both, the literal and the hidden. Objects are painted at the moment that they exchange a useless ideal for an economic quality; these are real commodities that have been obsessively rendered as fetishes."

It is all too easy to miss the "hidden" elements of Leach's work, such as the reflection of text in an animal's eye. "I look at them for a long time and I don't expect anyone else to stand and look at them for eight hours. Most people look for a couple of minutes and sure, they miss a lot. But I am looking for an intimate relationship with the viewer to develop, different layers, different meanings. That implies that someone is going to own it, which is at odds with much of the meaning behind the pictures."

Leach's conversation is littered with cultural references, from the phantasmagoria of Raymond Roussel's 1914 novel Locus Solus to the paranoid sci-fi writings of Philip K. Dick, from the Japanese anime masterpiece Ghost in the Shell to Ridley Scott's famous film Blade Runner. The last, which he saw as a youth, is an especially important cornerstone. "The imagery, the tones, the structure of the shots, the whole sense of decay informed my aesthetic preferences," he says.

Like those references, there can be no disputing that Leach's works are dark and claustrophobic, but there is nothing melancholic about the artist himself. "Like anybody I have my ups and downs, but I don't have a dark outlook on life in general."

Leach's strange career path began in school. "I didn't study any art at school," he says. "But I would draw all the time, caricatures of the teachers having sex, that kind of thing. There's probably some of my work still adorning the toilet walls. I wasn't really interested in economics so I would draw all through the classes."

Born in Adelaide, he moved to Melbourne in 1995 and studied art at RMIT part time, where he was encouraged by such artists as Tony Lloyd. He secured shows at alternative spaces including BUS and Spacement. "I was learning the difference between dabbling in paint and having a serious art practice," he says. "It took a long time to take myself seriously as an artist." Having taken the plunge after 14 years with the Tax Office, Leach says the move is like "waking up after being asleep a long time."
Lessons from the Old Testament

Martin Flanagan

The Age, 26/04/08

Sam Leach is among a group of artists using Biblical texts as inspiration to look at issues of the environment, writes Martin Flanagan.

SAM LEACH GREW UP IN the city of Adelaide but both his parents were from farms and he spent holidays in the country. He paints lots of birds and animals, although, mostly, the birds and animals he paints are not native to Australia. He acknowledges they present a special challenge to him.

The art that most intrigues him comes from 17th-century Holland. He encountered paintings from that time and place when he went to Europe in his late teens and visited lots of galleries. He was drawn to them then and says he keeps going back to them, "purely to learn how they did it".

"It was a time much like our own," he explains. "The first commercial corporations were emerging, the people were ruled not by a pope nor by a king but by merchants and traders. There was an established middle class and a burgeoning interest in science". Leach has an interest in science - he reads New Scientist magazine and listens to the ABC science shows. Recently, he absorbed the passionate arguments of scientist Richard Dawkins against the existence of God.

Leach, 35, has a masters' degree in fine arts but his first degree was in economics. For some years, he supported his art by working in the Tax Office, but for the past two years he has been painting full-time. Since he commonly paints still life with birds and animals, his work has within it symbols of death and a consequent theme of mortality. This, as he says, is not morbid. "It's through acknowledging your mortality that you find out what you value in life."

He is also an atheist. "I don't believe in an omnipotent deity." But, as a realist, he think it's a pity that when people throw out religion, they throw out the wisdom that comes with it.

Leach is part of an exhibition titled Bal Tashchit (Thou Shalt Not Destroy) at the Jewish Museum in St Kilda, for which 14 artists, both Jewish and non-Jewish, were invited to respond to the issue of the environment using texts from the Old Testament. Leach chose Jeremiah 17:11, which says that "as the partridge sitteth on eggs, and hatcheth them not" so the man who "getteth riches, and not by right" will lose his wealth in the middle of his days and end up a fool.

In explaining why he chose this text, Leach quotes Sir Nicholas Stern, author of the Stern Review on climate change to the British government. "Climate change presents a unique challenge for economics: it is the greatest and widest-ranging market failure ever seen." For Leach, the message of Jeremiah 17:11 is that if we abuse the environment for economic gain, we will pay the price.

He has two small children, the younger born only a few weeks ago. I ask him if that played any part in his choice of a subject for this exhibition. He hadn't thought of that connection, but he does know his art changed character around the time he became a father for the first time. Before then, his art had been largely about architecture and didn't have "living things" in it. Then birds and animals started appearing in his work.

On his way to creating the art for the present exhibition, Leach met a rabbi who told him about the mitzvah of shiluach hakan. This had to do with birds and nests and is recorded as follows: "If a bird's nest happens to be before you . . . young birds or eggs, and the mother is roosting . . . you shall not take the mother with the young. You shall surely send away the mother and take the young for yourself, so that it will be good for you and prolong your days."

The mitzvah started the picture in his head. What emerged was a series of six birds with eggs, all
painted individually on copper in layers and then overlaid with epoxy resin. Three of the birds are dead, three are living. At one level, this is like the art he admires from Holland - an art of stillness with dark backgrounds and allegories being played out in the small detail. It's a bit like reading a detective novel.

The eggs of two of the dead birds are made of cold, hard steel. No life there. The egg of the third dead bird is a digital figure. It will come and go. The eggs of the three living birds are represented as tiny sputniks with antennas like silver threads. Leach describes himself as an optimist. He believes in progress, in the possibilities of science and technology, but says the mother bird has to be protected for everyone's sake.
Albino wallabies and lifeless birds make Sam Leach an intriguing emerging artist who is much in demand, writes Katrina Strickland.

It's been a good month for 34-year-old Melbourne artist Sam Leach. In late October he won the inaugural $10,000 acquisitive Eutick Memorial Still Life Award, given by the Coffs Harbour Regional Art Gallery, and last week he won the 2007 Siemens Acquisition Award, a $1000 prize that comes with a $7000 scholarship from RMIT.

And last night his first solo show in his home town of Adelaide opened at Peter Walker Fine Art, where all nine paintings had already been sold. Leach was more excited at the thought that his parents, grandparents and cousins, and those of his wife Emma, would be there. Since finishing his fine art degree at RMIT in 2005, Leach has developed quite a following. His paintings of skulls and bones, and (usually dead) animals - birds, albino wallabies, deer - are typically done on copper or Japanese ash, with the animal or object pitted against a black background. The entire work is covered in resin, giving the painting a high-gloss finish. Following an unhappy split with Sydney art dealer Michael Carr, he moved to Sullivan & Strumpf, which will show 18 of his works in a solo Sydney show in March. S&S co-owner Ursula Sullivan says half the March exhibition is already sold and the gallery is holding back on selling the lot prior to opening.

Leach's smaller works sell for between $3000 and $4000; his larger ones for $8000. Artbank and the Geelong Art Gallery are the only public collections that hold his work. "We could have sold them out in three seconds flat if we wanted to, but we want them to go to the right collections," Sullivan says. "He's still an emerging artist. There seems to be great interest in his work, but we have to handle it the right way."

Not surprisingly, Leach says he draws a lot of inspiration from 17th century Dutch masters, in particular Willem van Aelst, who specialised in painting flowers and game. When he began painting he'd knock off a painting in half a day; now each work takes him one to two months to complete. "I fell in love with the technique; slow seems to be the key," Leach says. "The painting has to be allowed to develop over time, building up layers through the thin application of paint."

He studied economics at Adelaide University prior to moving to Melbourne to study fine art, and works intermittently at the Australian Taxation Office. He says his interest in 17th century Holland stems from the fact it was the "prototype for the liberal capitalist society we experience today". "The links between commerce, science and wealth were forged in that culture," he says. Leach says his animals and skulls stand as "metaphors for people". He has done one painting of a human, former Victorian premier Jeff Kennett, which hung as a finalist in this year's Archibald Prize. Kennett had bought Leach's work through Metro 5, a Melbourne gallery, which awarded him its annual $40,000 under-35 art prize in 2006, so the artist asked him to sit for him. He's got a few more humans coming up in a Melbourne show opening at Nellie Castan Gallery in May. "They're based on 18th century portraits. It's humans as scientific experiments as well."
Through a glass, brightly: The Paintings of Sam Leach

Dr Stephen Halley.

(ex. Cat.)

Sam Leach paints beautiful, jewel-like images with an intensity that resonates well beyond their modest size. Animals, people, skeletons, all shimmer bright, hovering from out of darkness. Subtly, dim lights and the hard-edged forms of the modern world subtly intrude, reflecting, glowing. These gleaming paintings evoke and encompass a wide range of essential issues but, in particular, they seem to address issues of Being and Non-Being. Beyond mere life and death, the states of Being and Non-Being determine all that is in the world. These twined terms also define that most distinct and cruel difference of reality – the distinction between what exists and what does not. It is these existential issues that effuse Leach’s paintings and are the force that ceaselessly draws me back to them.

Before wading into such deep waters, though, we should take a deep breath. Despite an apparent simplicity of composition, these are complex works, rich in possibilities, not easily reduced to singularity. Looking down into their glassy, reflective surfaces, like peering into a rock pool, a compelling force draws you down into their depths. Here all manner of things reside. Some flash incompletely into view while others lie resting, latent in the stillness. For instance, the works might be considered within the genre of animal paintings; or perhaps as a type of portraiture. Then again, they overtly reference scientific illustration and seem to pose questions regarding the relationship between photography and painting. They might also be viewed as a form of memento mori - the venerable painting genre that underlines the transitory nature of things and the inevitability of death. Certainly the images reference and expand upon 17th Century Dutch and Spanish still-life painting and, whilst their minimal stage-like settings recall the tropes of this historical tradition, they also resemble modern office interiors and stark corporate foyers. In contrast however, images of tiny LED displays and other contemporary technologies pierce the traditions’ darkened hues with an intense juxtaposition; their frozen flashes akin to stilled heartbeats. For some time too, the artist has been interested in the coincident development of the still-life tradition with the invention of corporate capitalism in the 17th century. Similarly, Leach is fascinated by the subsequent rational and technological order of vision systematized during the Enlightenment and that photography is popularly assumed to encapsulate. There is also a speculation in the works between these various modes of perception - the artist’s subjective vision, the subjectivity of painting itself and the clinical, scientific stance of photography – all of which might be explained by the idea of the holotype.

Holotypes, from which the exhibition takes its name, are single physical specimens, photographs, drawings or other evidence of a particular organism, that have been chosen to be representative of its species and ideally, should be ‘typical’ of its taxon. Once selected, the holotype becomes a benchmark - rather like the official metre measurement held in the Bureau International des Poids et Mesures in France. A strange thing then, a holotype, both a unique object but also one of a series. Yet the creatures depicted here are not all holotypes, indeed, in many cases they seem to be strangely unrepresentative of their type, albinos and leukodermics, dressed and posed in a manner more baroque than scientific. Perhaps then the paintings, or painting itself, stands in relationship to other images in the way a holotype is related to its species – a unique object that bears a similarity to
other images but is emblematic and particular. This singularity among similarity seems to be another touchstone of the work and declares painting itself as unique even when resembling photographic images.

These painted objects, isolated against their dark grounds, invite a sustained examination and concentrated meditation from the viewer. The effect is disorienting. As anyone who has intensely stared for a long time at any object will attest, there comes a moment when its commonplace aspect begins to shift. Objects are most usually defined by their use-value and their true nature is only ever given a perfunctory regard. Through intense scrutiny, however, an object may tremorously waver and seem set to dissolve, to take on another aspect, to manifest itself as a pure form, divorced from its quotidian function and conventional approximation. It was Kant who suggested we can never know the phenomenon of perception in this pure form, as the thing-in-itself – that is, in its essential nature without the mediation of perception and prior knowledge. Yet, these moments of tantalizing imminence - where the routine totters on transcendent revelation, exist – even if never fully actualising. Leach’s paintings encourage such a sustained examination and the images stand poised at the point where appearance seems set to surrender its mysteries - but will this dissolution reveal an essential essence or a gaping nothingness?

All these considerations lie latent, embedded in the skins of these highly worked surfaces but for me, they relentlessly invite a consideration of Being and Non-Being. When I look at these intensely rendered forms - at the poignant and vehement observation of these dead creatures embalmed through paint and photography – my considerations are transported beyond the restrictive binaries of life and death. All the universe contains all the atoms that will ever be. With chaotic order these are reformed again and again - simply, and with complexity - to create different modes of Being. When we look at any object in this world, it is salutary to consider that, reckoning by deep time, all that currently exists are but dust motes caught for an instant in a shaft of light, the slightest specks of Being. All that we see today will dissolve and disappear, be it a life form or something so apparently permanent as a rock, or a mountain, or a world. Each exists in the eons of time as briefly as the spark of an LED light. The searing intensity of Leach’s images, where time seems to have been miraculously stilled, or slowed as if wading through resin, makes each depicted figure speak of this Being. And then, by the artificiality of this moment, arrested and slowed in paint, to the inevitability of Non-Being.

These works are giddying revelations of deep time. Unlike the moralistic intentions of memento mori paintings though, they speak instead of the wonderment and fragility of Being. Rather than suggest we despise the objects of this world in favour of a world to come, they spark a desire to seize existence in an ardent embrace. For, as we peer into these resin-coated, pool-like paintings, where forms are encased like insects trapped in amber, do we not see ourselves reflected back in their glassy surface, mercilessly occupying the same space?

Stephen Haley 2008
Vogue Sept/Oct 07
The Spoils

Peter Ellis

(ex. Cat)

In his ensemble of works entitled The Spoils Sam Leach evokes the dead air of vanitas, the exhausted spoils of the hunt, the exotic other in the guise of frozen marmosets and the wunderkammer of deceased humming birds.

Dutch still life painting of the 17th century is characterised by symbolic narratives of wealth, power, moral warnings and the transitory nature of life itself. Leach’s paintings hint subtly at our own time and space as a continuum of this never-ending cycle.

*“The air one sees in the paintings of the masters is not the air one breathes.” [From a reported conversation with Edgar Degas]*

The air in these stylishly rendered and restrained paintings is the air of air-conditioned corporate space. We see a vanitas skull once reflected on delphware, now lolling eerily on polished formica or the black marble floor of the boardroom. Perhaps a chief executive officer depicted in the ultimate takeover. The raw wood grain of the support reveals itself under the paint like a ghostly after image, reinforcing its material existence.

Elsewhere one finds a plumped game-bird and expired waterfowl in a black void, there are small LED lights of the 20th century elevator visible, the only thing still animated in this office mausoleum.

Integral to the motifs in these paintings is their surface. Sam Leach has exaggerated the varnish and protective glass of the Dutch Masters with a thick resin varnish. On several works painted on aluminium and copper this varnish congeals, like honey on the edges of the works. The drips are affixed to the wall, frozen in time and act like the moulding of a gilt frame.

The effect of this super gloss distances and removes the viewer from the work; it is as if observing an image through the plate glass of a St Kilda road headquarters or a digital television screen.

A painting of a dead hare, in rigor mortis contains the Latin phrase “Et in arcadia ego” emblazoned in red digital font, reminding us today as it did Pieter Claesz and other Dutch Masters that amidst life is death.

Peter Ellis

*“Cited in Georges Jeanne, ‘Souvenirs sur Degas’ in Revue Universelle 1933.*

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