DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

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Painted objects: investigating the imagery of Australian iconic culture

DISSERTATION

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ABSTRACT

*Painted objects: investigating the imagery of Australian iconic culture*

The presentation of the thesis comprises the Studio Practice component (66%), the culmination of which takes the form of an exhibition of paintings held at the ANU School of Art Gallery from 15–23 March 2006 and the Report which documents the nature and development of the research undertaken during the course of the study, together with the Dissertation component (33%). The Studio Practice component has been based in the Painting Workshop and has examined the topic through a painted investigation of Australian iconic culture, encompassing themes of rurality, pub culture, mateship and humour. Popular culture stereotypes have been examined with the intention of challenging the parameters of how we define identity. The Dissertation undertakes an analysis of the artwork of Noel McKenna and Glenn Morgan, focusing on the ways in which humour provides a framework for exploring aspects of everyday Australian experience, and through this, popular conceptions of Australian national identity.

DECLARATION OF ORIGINALITY

I, Waratah Lahy... (your signature) (10/12/09) hereby declare that the thesis here presented is the outcome of the research project I have undertaken during my candidacy, that I am the sole author unless otherwise indicated, and that I have fully documented the source of ideas, references, quotations or paraphrases attributable to other authors.
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1. INTRODUCTION

This dissertation focuses on the work of Australian artists Glenn Morgan and Noel McKenna. Throughout the paper I will address the way in which Morgan and McKenna observe the familiar and incongruous aspects of everyday life, reinvesting their subjects with a greater insight through the use of humour. Humour provides a framework through which to enter and interpret Morgan and McKenna's work. I will focus specifically on the way in which they use humour to alter our perceptions of familiar objects and experiences as a way to examine aspects of Australian identity. In particular I will explore the way in which their humorous use of scale shapes both the physical form and conceptual content of their work. I will also explore the way in which both artists use specific mediums and materials as part of their humorous strategies.

The impetus for this research began with an interest in humour in contemporary art practice. I was specifically interested in the way humour could help breach the boundaries between art and non-art audiences. Allusions to humour in contemporary art are frequent, but close analysis of the function of humour in art is rare. I thought it was interesting that the very quality that made a lot of art accessible and engaging was given the least amount of attention. Artists, reviewers and curators frequently seemed to refer to an artist's use of humour in their work without exploring its deeper meanings. Furthermore, even if the function of humour was integral to the conceptual premise of the work it almost always seemed to be valid only if it was used to prop up a more 'serious' idea. The discrepancy between the use of humour and the minimal attention it garnered suggested an interesting area of research. However, I soon discovered that it is next to impossible to extricate the humour from the subject; it is almost like expecting the human body to function without a skeleton. I therefore decided to consider them in relation to each other.

I began my research by surveying recent exhibitions of humour in contemporary Australian art. From the beginning, I wanted my study to focus on work that would appeal to a broad audience. I was not interested in the kind of humour in art that

1 I use the broad term 'non-art' to suggest a category of people who may only have a limited interest in art and who do not have knowledge of art theories or contemporary art practice.

depended on a knowledge of art history to get the joke. For the most part I felt that exhibitions of humorous art in Australia reinforced the exclusivity of humour: they showed works that demonstrated how ‘clever’ art is but not necessarily how funny. The humour content of the exhibitions mostly fell into categories of the witty, ironic and incongruous: ideas that were lucky to elicit a chuckle but would be unable to raise a hearty chortle. I wanted to find artworks that actually make the viewer laugh, but there were very few of them. Interestingly, I discovered that if art makes the viewer laugh, then it almost always relies on text or an audio component to make the joke, whether as part of the artwork or included in an accompanying explanation.

My survey of Australian exhibitions yielded up a shortlist of artists including Guan Wei, Christopher Langton, Maria Kozic, Tracey Moffatt, Simryn Gill, Hou Leong, John Kelly, Noel McKenna, Bill Yaxley and Glenn Morgan. With the possible exceptions of Maria Kozic and Simryn Gill, all of the artists addressed the idea of Australian cultural identity within their practice. The work of the artists in my original shortlist was also distinguishable by its tactility (Langton’s giant inflatable kangaroos, Simryn Gill’s Roadkill made from roadside rubbish, Bill Yaxley’s hand carved sculptures, Glenn Morgan and Noel McKenna’s dioramas); or its incongruity (Guan Wei’s Ned Kelly in a classical Chinese landscape, Maria Kozic’s Read This featuring swear words ‘planted’ in images of flowers, Hou Leong putting himself in the picture with famous Australians, John Kelly and his stacked cows and Noel McKenna’s observations of everyday oddities).

Although I originally planned to survey humour in Australian art, I also wanted to find artists whose use of humour was an ongoing and integral part of their practice, and I also wanted to respond to work that had a uniquely ‘Aussie’ engagement with the theme of Australian identity. Eventually I decided to focus on an in-depth study of Noel McKenna and Glenn Morgan’s work. Both artists have produced a substantial amount of work throughout their careers and have consistently used humour to address their chosen subjects, and also address themes of identity in a particularly Australian way.

Most literature on humour emerges out of disciplines such as philosophy, psychology and sociology. It is preoccupied with categorising different forms of humour, and with developing various theories for why humour exists in culture. From the beginning of

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3 In his book Laughter: A Scientific Examination, Robert R. Provine contends that laughter primarily occurs as a result of verbal communication between two or more people. He and his research assistants surveyed over 1000 naturally occurring laughter instances and found that laughter always followed some form of verbal statement. (They also found that laughter in a group situation had a lot to do with male female power dynamics). It didn’t matter what was said: words were clearly the key to eliciting laughter. When surveying the statements made immediately prior to laughter Provine and his assistants found that ‘jokes will work, but people laugh more often after such innocuous lines as “I’ll see you guys later” or “Are you sure?”’ Robert R. Provine, Laughter: A Scientific Investigation (New York, New York: Penguin Books, 2000), p 40.
my investigation of humour theory I began to get tangled up in the definitions and categories of humour: wit, whimsy, satire, parody, irony, burlesque, gallows humour, black humour and toilet humour are all enumerated in the literature. One could be wittily ironic, whimsically satirical and a piss-taker. Then there were the theories of humour and laughter such as 'the superiority theory, the relief theory and the incongruity theory.' The field of humour research is extensive, covering a broad range of related subjects, but the surprising connection between them all is that humour studies are singularly un-funny.

Whilst I have found humour theory useful for reflecting on the social uses of humour and laughter, this project does not set out to simply illustrate the way in which humour in Australian art might demonstrate various theories about humour and laughter. Rather, it mobilises aspects of such theories to articulate broader social and cultural issues in the work of my chosen artists. Specifically, it seeks to explore how humour operates in the way Australians see themselves, especially when considering how we pride ourselves on our sense of humour and our ability to make or take a joke. Humour is an attribute that fits in with our belief that Australia is an open, fair-spirited and classless society, and as such, I presumed that humour in art would function in a similarly egalitarian manner, able to both engage and entertain a diverse audience. With this in mind, the study focuses on the work of Glenn Morgan and Noel McKenna, artists whose practice implicitly questions and evaluates aspects of Australian identity.

This dissertation pursues the premise that both Glenn Morgan and Noel McKenna successfully use humour as a strategy for engaging the viewer with potentially difficult subjects; for drawing attention to the conceptual importance of scale as a tool for re-evaluating the meaning of familiar things and for questioning aspects of Australian national identity.

This argument is borne out through an examination of the themes addressed in the artwork of Glenn Morgan and Noel McKenna. I will focus specifically on Noel

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4 The three theories of humour as related by Simon Critchley are:
1 In the first theory, represented by Plato, Aristotle, Quintilian and ...Hobbes, we laugh from feelings of superiority over other people, from ‘suddaine Glory arising from suddaine Conception of some Eminency in our selves, by Comparison with the Infirmities of others or with our owne formerly’.
2 The relief theory emerges in the nineteenth century in the work of Herbert Spencer, where laughter is explained as a release of pent-up nervous energy, but the theory is best known in the version given in Freud’s 1905 book Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious, where the energy that is relieved and discharged in laughter provides pleasure because it allegedly economizes upon energy that would ordinarily be used to contain or suppress psychic activity.
3 Humour is produced by the experience of a felt incongruity between what we know or expect to be the case, and what actually takes place in the joke, gag, jest or blague.

McKenna’s paintings of Australian Big Things, as well as a varied selection of Glenn Morgan’s dioramas which present an anecdotal recasting of personal thoughts and events from his own life. Morgan and McKenna make work that responds to an Australian vernacular in terms of subject, context and appearance.

There are many interesting parallels to be found in Morgan and McKenna’s work, for instance they both use a range of genres including painting as well as three-dimensional work. Morgan predominantly makes dioramas, a form that McKenna has also investigated. While McKenna uses a restrained palette dominated by greys and blacks, Morgan employs lurid colours with little tonal variation. McKenna’s paint is thin, and sometimes scumbled so sparingly that it bears the mark of his brush as well as the surface underneath; Morgan’s paint is thickly opaque, with some of his objects appearing to have been dipped in paint rather than having had it applied with a brush.

Both artists share a stylistic disposition towards the low-key, humble and a ‘naïve, folk-art style,’ although the effects of that approach vary greatly between them. On an aesthetic level, Morgan’s work is more likely to attract descriptions such as ‘naïve’, a word that can unfortunately be used quite dismissively when it comes to art. Morgan has commented on the idea of naïve art, in relation to his work and in the work of more traditional ‘naïve artists,’ succinctly noting that:

I wouldn’t call my work naïve one iota — I know what I’m doing. I actually don’t even like that title ‘naïve’ — it sort of infers these people don’t know what they’re doing but I think they really know what they’re doing and I reckon they’re just making really conscious decisions about what they want and [why] they’re making it.6

While it is possible to interpret both artists’ work in the context of outsider art and naïve art (especially Morgan) I ultimately believe that Morgan and McKenna’s work belongs within a broader contemporary art genre, albeit one that borrows heavily from the visual references of other styles of art. Morgan has stated that ‘I see myself as a social comment artist. I don’t fit comfortably in the main stream of contemporary art and I don’t really feel any need to. As an artist of the twentieth century I feel free to make any type of work I want.’7

Despite the fact that their aesthetic is frequently commented on in reviews and articles, for the most part I have decided not to address the ‘naïve’ and ‘outsider art’ possibilities

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6 Glenn Morgan, Art to Touch: The Work of Artist Glenn Morgan (Warrnambool, VIC: South West Institute of TAFE Department of Art, 2002), (DVD).
7 Glenn Morgan, ‘Artist’s Statement,’ Art to Touch (Warrnambool: Warrnambool Art Gallery, 1996).
of the work of my chosen artists, choosing instead to focus on the more conceptual aspects.

However, the most significant linking theme between Morgan and McKenna is their consistent use of humour. The element of humour in their work offers an entry point for the viewer as well as a way of re-examining familiar themes, scenes and ideas. Both artists use humour in an inclusive way: the viewer sees the humour of a particular scene through the artists' eyes, and is 'let in' on the joke. Despite a healthy appreciation of the ridiculous, both artists also use humour as a means of addressing the pathos, injustice, and sadness of everyday life.

McKenna's style of humour is inclined to the witty; he is adept at noticing the peculiar and strange characteristics of things that are often regarded as ordinary and banal. His humble compositions and restrained use of colour suggests a sympathy with the pathos of the everyday, when in fact it often belies sharply critical social observations. His humour has a surprising sting, made all the more potent by its unexpectedness. Indeed, the sharp edge of McKenna's humour often appears to go unnoticed, clouded by descriptions such as 'quirky' and 'whimsical'. One reviewer wrote of a McKenna painting that 'It's like a Gary Larson cartoon without having to second-guess the punchline. There is no punchline; there is only weirdness.' While such observations may evoke the intangible qualities of McKenna's work, the accumulated legacy of similar reviews means that his work is often typecast on the basis of what has already been said about it, even if it is not always true or applicable.

McKenna has said:

I must confess to finding it hard to write about issues connected with humour in my painting. If I could generalise I would say that I have a grey sense of humour, I like a humour that is constructed from instinctive thoughts and can surprise the viewer. Humour is such a personal thing though … it could be seen as stupid or even sad which is where my grey description comes in.

Perhaps because McKenna himself is so ambivalent about the humour of his work it has often meant that it is difficult to assess and judge the impact it has. This dissertation aims to specifically address the humour of McKenna’s work in context of both humour theory and the role Big Things play within popular culture.

Glenn Morgan's approach to humour is much more overt. For him, humour is quite clearly a means of engaging the viewer with a subject in order to get them considering bigger issues. He notes that

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8 Peter Hill, 'Noel McKenna,' *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 13 September 2002.

[My] works are often looked at as being fun. People enjoy turning the handles and having a bit of a giggle. However I hope they are not merely seen as humorous toys for … the subject matter covers a diverse range of social issues.\(^{10}\)

The 'fun' Morgan refers to lies in the unorthodox style of his art. An amalgamation of diverse influences such as painting, dioramas and comics, his art is peopled by figures sprouting speech bubbles that contain expressions such as 'show us ya tits'. Figures and scenes are rigged up to a crank that the viewer is allowed to turn, part of his 'hands on approach'. Morgan's art deals with the big issues in human existence such as sex, love, family, sickness and death and this in combination with his longstanding interest in art that can be touched, draws the viewer into these big themes. His references to popular culture genres such as TV and soap opera / sitcoms also provide some familiar territory to engage the viewer.

All of Glenn Morgan's work is characterised by his use of self-deprecating humour. It is the constant and fundamental element apparent in all of his pieces. Humour, especially that of the laconic self-deprecating variety, is often held to be a central element of Australian national and cultural identity. By all accounts, humour is what defines us and makes us unique, a position that is reflected in Morgan's work. Sometimes it is almost as if he uses humour to mask an un-blokey interest in expressing deeply personal feelings, a trait in keeping with the stereotyped Aussie bloke. At other times, his bawdy sense of humour merely reinforces the subject he is exploring. Despite the obvious importance of humour in Morgan's work, in this dissertation I aim to look beyond the known quantities of his humour to reveal the deeper meanings beneath, to look beyond that which can be taken for granted.

The quality of humour used by each of my chosen artists is different: McKenna's is subtle, whilst Morgan's is not. These qualities have sometimes meant that their work can be typecast in particular ways. In this research I attempt to look beyond the ways in which their work is normally regarded to open up more complex themes within each artist's work.

A further key element in both Noel McKenna's paintings of Big Things and Glenn Morgan's dioramas is the way in which they invert the normal sense of scale. One of the functions of humour is to reinforce the social scale: people and ideas that are laughed at are often 'belittled', while those who laugh gather confirmation of their superiority from the strength and size of the group who share their beliefs. By inverting the scale so that what was big is now small, Morgan and McKenna allow us to see with a perspective

\(^{10}\) Morgan, 'Artist's Statement,' Art to Touch.
that is normally denied to us. Susan Stewart observes that 'we know the gigantic only partially', but by reducing the scale of things Morgan and McKenna offer the chance to look at the familiar with a fresh perspective. I will argue that their deliberate engagement with a change of scale opens up a set of possibilities for engaging with the work in new and unexpected ways.

My interest in the significance of scale owes much to Susan Stewart's fascinating work *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection*. Stewart's observations on the nature of the miniature and the dollhouse have been an invaluable tool for unravelling the layered meanings in Glenn Morgan's artwork and looking beyond the surface aesthetics. Morgan's idiosyncratic technique and unique combination of fine and folk art references can have the effect of deflecting the viewer away from the theoretical aspects of his work, however by addressing the size of the work and unpacking the theories of scale, a more complex set of meanings emerges. Similarly, through my extensive contemplation of the miniature, theories of the gigantic helped me to untangle the puzzle of big and small as presented in Noel McKenna's paintings of Australian Big Things. Susan Stewart's theories provided a scale of their own by which to measure the meanings of Glenn Morgan and Noel McKenna's work.

I have also found Ralph Rugoff's writings insightful and instructive regarding issues of scale and the significance of the diorama. Rugoff curated the travelling exhibition *At the Threshold of the Visible: Miniscule and Small-Scale Art, 1964–1996* for the New York based Independent Curators Incorporated and his accompanying essay *Homeopathic Strategies* was excellent for contemplating the significance of the miniature and opposing effects of the gigantic. Similarly, Toby Kamps, curator of the exhibition *Small World: Dioramas in Contemporary Art* for the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego, wrote an insightful essay on the value and significance of dioramas in contemporary art.

While theories of scale, the diorama and the dollhouse are easily attributed, those touching on the other aspect of this dissertation, that of Australian identity, are more diverse. In order to reflect the way in which identity is perceived through popular culture, I have referenced articles, opinions and stories from mass-media publications, television programs and books; sources that are deliberately non-academic. I have done so because much of this dissertation deals with experiences of the everyday as well as ideas and objects that are readily accessible to a broad range of people. This necessitated that my reading would be broad in scope, encompassing works not normally regarded as 'scholarly'. One particularly useful book was *Big Things: Australia's amazing roadside attractions* by David Clark. This compendium of Bigs included an interesting essay by

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academic Dr Stephen Stockwell as well as extensive information about Australia's Big Things, including their makers, motives and community reactions.

In 2004 I attended a course run by Dr Donna Merwick and Professor Greg Dening called Challenges to Perform at the ANU Centre for Cross Cultural Research. The aim of the course was to develop the creative potential of post-graduate research, enabling research outcomes to be more accessible to a broader audience. I have found the course invaluable in developing my writing 'voice'; not always an easy thing for a visual artist. As a consequence, my voice in this dissertation is that of an artist engaging with the work of fellow artists. I have devoted a chapter each to Noel McKenna and Glenn Morgan in order to maintain an individual focus on their work. I have used my descriptive skills as an artist to observe and convey both the visual and conceptual qualities of their work in an accessible manner. The chapter on Noel McKenna and his paintings of Big Things has been contextualised within the broader culture of Big Things in Australia, returning the subject to the culture from which they have come. The chapter on Glenn Morgan has been structured around an examination of artworks that address the themes of sex, voyeurism, family and responsibility, sensory experience, sickness and death.
INTRODUCTION

'Big Thing' is the term used to denote any roadside sculpture/monument that depicts an object larger than life. In this chapter I will examine Noel McKenna's paintings of Big Things in relation to their role in Australian popular culture. As well as the physically big, I will also be looking at how the term may apply to other areas of Australian culture that are conceptually big, such as sport, a subject McKenna has also addressed.

Big Things polarise opinion. For many, Big Things are grotesque eyesores that blight the landscape. For others, they are a source of fun and amusement, often linked to childhood memories of family holidays. Big Things embody the traits we admire and the traits we abhor. Even if we dislike a Big Thing for its visual ugliness, crassness and dubious architectural skills, we may still appreciate the optimistic motivation behind it: the willingness to give something a go no matter how crazy it may seem.

Noel McKenna's paintings of Big Things convey the emotive range they inspire. Isolated from their physical and commercial settings, they are rendered harmless and pathetic, but endearingly so. McKenna presents scaled down versions of Big Things, stripping them of their grandeur. The scale he imposes makes Big Things small enough to be inoffensive and almost poignantly sad, but at the same time their sense of the pathetic reinforces our sense of superiority over them.

Big Things are sometimes referred to as Australian popular culture 'icons', but in McKenna's paintings there are no distinctive signifiers to tell us that the thing in question is Australian. His images suggest the inherent irony of the supposition that Big Things embody something unique about Australian culture.

Throughout this chapter I will refer to Dr Stephen Stockwell's writings on the place of Big Things in Australian culture. In his essay Big Things: Larrikinism, Low Art and The Land Dr Stephen Stockwell repeatedly refers to the use of humour in conjunction with Big Things, especially the 'larrikin tradition'. He says:

At one level, Big Things are just another form of commercial signage, attracting potential customers to road-side enterprises by having a bit of a joke in the great Australian larrikin tradition. But the passions that Big Things raise suggest that these roadside attractions have other dimensions – artistic, political and spiritual.12

Stockwell’s theories have particular relevance when looking at Noel McKenna’s paintings of Big Things. McKenna’s superficially simple works address the many complexities of Big Things, including their artistic dimensions.

I will also refer to Susan Stewart’s theories of the gigantic. Stewart notes that ‘... contemporary public forms of the gigantic serve an analogous ideological function as they both memorialize and call into question our relation to the system of commodities.’ Her statement draws attention to the dualistic function of Big Things: both as monuments to local achievement and industry and the use of Big Things as advertisements for a product or region. Stewart’s observation is also relevant in relation to McKenna’s paintings, given that they present a specific and decontextualised view of Big Things that renders them possibly more agreeable and accessible than they are in ‘real life’.

BIG HUMOUR

Australia positively groans under the weight of big things littered along the highway like jokes awaiting their punch-lines. Big Things are beginning to attract a big following. In recent years they have permeated the fabric of popular culture and have been the inspiration for art, books, documentaries, radio and television programs, tourist guides and websites. There are currently 146 Big Things located around Australia and some would argue that they are Australian icons.

This chapter is conceived as a kind of road trip, locating an analysis of McKenna’s work in context of the social, political and cultural meanings of Big Things. To begin our metaphorical journey we’ll start with a Noel McKenna painting titled Big Things, Australia (overleaf).

McKenna’s painting depicts a giant map of Australia adorned with postcard-sized images of Big Things, but apart from the scumbled blue border demarcating the edge of the continent, it’s not like a regular map: none of the capital cities have been marked in, there are no topographical references, no rivers, roads or indication of scale. The landmass of Australia is white, and apart from a thin ribbon of aqua, the sea is too. All that white space leads to a couple of interpretations: one suggesting that Australia is

13 Susan Stewart, On Longing, p 91.
FIG. 1. Noel McKenna, *Big Things, Australia*

like a clean white sheet on which to inscribe; another could be referring to the ongoing 'white Australia' mentality. Either way, it sure makes those nice bright colours of the Big Things stand out. This map overlooks the known details of Australia as if they were lost in a fog, with only a motley array of Big Things emerging from a magic realist mist. Most of the Big Things on the map are clustered across the eastern states and seaboard like a particularly invasive weed, and if there is one thing this map tells us, it's the fact that very few Big Things have anything to do with Australia's natural flora and fauna. In this map, the only Big Thing that distinctly resembles a naturally occurring landmark is the brown bulk of the Big Potato, which McKenna has thoughtfully placed close to where we might find Uluru on a more conventional map. It's unfortunate that the nickname of the Big Potato is the Big Turd. But moving along, we're going to make our first port of call at one of the wonders of the agricultural world, as depicted in Noel McKenna's painting *Big Orange, Berri, SA.*

In this painting the Big Orange is placed right in the middle of the picture, anchored to the landscape by means of a grey concrete-looking base and a path that trickles like juice to the edge of the frame. We assume that it is a Big Thing, but there really isn't much in the painting to give it an accurate sense of scale: the surrounding landscape has been simplified to a green plane of grass and a low dark line of blobby trees is held in place by
the flat blue sky. The Orange could be gargantuan in scale, but it could also be a small thing superimposed on the landscape, or a model, or just a weird picture. The Orange is without context; it looks as awkward and out of place. The trees in the background are massed, featureless and fruitless, unless perhaps the Big Orange is the prize they’ve all been nurturing. It’s a humorous painting because of the incongruity of its elements but it is also a puzzling work – nothing quite adds up, and if it’s a joke, then it is, as Stockwell and Carlisle suggest, one without a punch line.

To a certain extent Big Things are humorous because of their incongruity with their surroundings. Schopenhauer describes the incongruity theory of humour thus: ‘laughter results from nothing but the suddenly perceived incongruity between a concept and the real object’. When we look at a Big Thing our ‘concept’ is the recognition of a familiar object, such as an orange. The incongruity – and therefore humour and laughter – stems from its unexpected size, particularly in relation to the other normal size things around it. In Big Orange, Berri the orange visually fills the space, but there is no explanation of why it is so much bigger than everything else (other than the information we get from the title). In real life, when we see a Big Thing we know it is at odds to its surroundings but in a painting we are asked to believe what we see, asked to accept the illusion despite the incongruity.

Big Things have long been the butt of jokes. Some Big Things are ridiculed for their complete woefulness of conception and construction, while Australia’s first Big Thing, the Big Banana, is joked about for fairly obvious – if puerile – reasons. Rockhampton’s Big Bulls (only one-and-a-half times life-size) are targeted on an ongoing basis – testicle

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17 Magritte explored this idea in his painting This is not a Pipe, where those words are painted underneath a painting of a pipe. His point: it is a painting of a pipe, not an actual pipe.
thefts are the punch line for that joke. Snatching the Bulls' balls became such a frequent occurrence that council workers carried replacement sets of testicles. Eventually steel rods were used to anchor them in place.

Humour is an interesting by-product of Big Things inasmuch as it forces an evaluation of attitudes and beliefs. Often regarded as a defining characteristic of Australian identity, humour pervades both our history and culture. Stephen Stockwell observes that ' ... Big Things ... celebrate the nation's tendency to the low art of larrikinism and the associated sardonic, ironic and anti-establishment humour often expressed in a public act or prank'.

Numerous Big Things give evidence to his ideas: the Big Boxing Croc at Humpty Doo, the Big Redback Spider in Brisbane, and the Big Mosquito from Hexham are all monuments celebrating native fauna that are both dangerous and annoying. Elevating their status is an ironic acknowledgement of their power. Big Things embodying a larrikin love of alcohol are also common: the Big Wine Cask, the Big Stubby, the Big Beer Can, a Big Rum Bottle and not one, but three Big Bottles.

However Stockwell's expression 'the low art of larrikinism' also implies a hierarchy of humour, with Big Things located towards the lower end of the spectrum. Humour can be used for divisive purposes and can be seen to represent the dichotomy between high and low culture and the corresponding attitudes of us and them, insider and outsider.

Simon Critchley proposes in his book _On Humour_ that the 'ostensive untranslatability' of humour functions 'like a linguistic defence mechanism', endowing 'native speakers with a . . . sense of their own cultural distinctiveness'. Once again, the Big Redback Spider can be used as an example of his theory, embodying a sense of humour that is regarded as being typically Australian: making a joke about something that is frightening, alarming or dangerous. The Big Redback Spider could have easily been inspired by Paul Hogan's memorable words in Crocodile Dundee: 'You call that a knife? This is a knife'. Other more benign Big Things also demonstrate the 'ostensive untranslatability' of their quintessential humour: in this case the Giant Earthworm comes to mind, as does the Big Oyster. Nimbin's Big Joint also provides a humorous icon for those partaking in the culture of dope smoking.

Humour also plays an important role in ensuring that everybody knows their place: 'Laughter polices Australian democracy, and makes sure that people do not get above themselves.'

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18 Dr Stephen Stockwell, 'Big Things: Larrikinism, Low Art and The Land,' p x.
‘superiority theory’: our humour lies in laughing at someone else, feeling we are superior to them. John Marsden explored this idea within an Australian context noting that:

Yes, we love comedy because it makes us feel superior. But it’s not so funny when we are the subjects of the comedy and other people are laughing at us. Australians have long taken pride in their supposed ability to laugh at themselves but mostly when we claim to be laughing at ourselves, we are in fact laughing at other people within our society. Everybody knows a Kath and Kim but nobody is a Kath and Kim.21

The kind of divisive laughter referred to by Marsden also reflects Stockwell’s ideas of ‘anti-establishment humour’.

In the 1980s designer and former ad-man Ken Done achieved widespread public recognition for his lite and bright paintings of Australian iconic culture, which subsequently spread like a consumer-driven pandemic. Clothing, swimwear, make-up, perfumes, tea towels, place mats, prints, calendars and diaries all bore the brunt of Done’s vision. *The Jones Family out for a Walk in their Ken Done Outfits*, a 1995 painting

by Noel McKenna (see over), takes aim at the ubiquitous popularity of the highly recognised Australian and offers a biting satire on the tastes of the time. Depicted in a moment of frozen perambulation is the Jones family: Dad, Mum and the two kids. The landscape through which they walk is bleak, barren and grey. Two trees complete the denuded vision, skeletal black silhouettes weeping their last leaves. The house from which the family has emerged has all the friendliness of a prison block. The unrelenting dreariness of the scene is broken only by the carefree designs and contrived explosions of colour and pattern in the outfits worn by the family, all of whom look drained of vitality, wan and listless, almost as if their outfits have sucked away their lifeblood. The little boy holds onto the string of a bright yellow balloon patterned with the trademark font of the name ‘Done’, a seemingly unjustified burst of optimism in the gloom. The word could also read done (dun), as in ‘done in’ or ‘done over’ or even ‘the job is now done, Ken Done has completed his conquest for global domination.

Critchley suggests that ‘Satire is often a question of scale, of the familiar becoming infinitely small or grotesquely huge’. In this vision of an unhappy world, the Ken Done outfits appear to survive with the resilience of cockroaches. They have become the primary focus and their presence is therefore disproportionately huge, reflecting the perception of Done Designs popularity.

For a brief period of time Done’s art and design was a metaphorical Big, colonising people and homes around the country. It didn’t need an oversized monument to lure in the customers, its ubiquity was advertising enough. In The Jones Family out for Walk in their Ken Done Outfits McKenna has used humour to bring the size of the Ken Done juggernaut back down to scale, and no doubt many people could relate to his blackly humorous vision. In his book Laughter: A Scientific Investigation Robert R. Provine traces philosophical attitudes to laughter and notes that the ‘earliest surviving theory of laughter is from Plato whose ‘attention to laughter derived more from his fear of its power to disrupt the state than delight from its practice’. Provine continues on to note that ‘Plato’s conclusion [was] that laughter has a malicious element associated with the derision of our inferiors’. Humour as form of mockery and belittlement is a strategy McKenna has clearly used in The Jones Family out for a Walk in their Ken Done Outfits. It is a device used to both question and ‘disrupt’ the Done monopoly.

Queensland boasts two Big Pineapples, one in Gympie, and the other in Nambour. The Big Pineapple in Nambour is possibly the more famous of the two and over the years has had a thriving trade in all things related to pineapples, but more recently found notoriety with the tax department, becoming an embattled tourist icon. Proponents for its

22 Simon Critchley, On Humour, p 15.
24 Ibid.
heritage significance argued that ‘... the Big Pineapple needs to be understood as being about more than the dominance of the consumer. Deeper meanings are to be found beyond the bigness of the Big Thing.’ The meanings alluded to are manifold: qualities such as pride, sense of ownership, humorous enjoyment and regional distinction and definition. Authors of *Monumental Queensland: Signposts on a Cultural Landscape* recount cultural historian Chris McConville’s 1988 snobbish comments that ‘Big Things “tell us something about provincial ambition, satisfiable through surrogates. They are the products of people who prefer quantity to quality”’. Throughout the following discussion I will endeavour to find some common ground between the two positions.

Barry Humphries included an image of the Big Pineapple, labelled with the words ‘A typical Queensland home’, in his 1980 book *Treasury of Australian Kitsch*. Although Humphries was satirising Australian taste (no pun intended), he wasn’t too far off the mark: the world’s first Big Thing – a giant elephant named Lucy, built in 1881 – was

FIG. 5. Noel McKenna, *Big Pineapple, Gympie* used as a private home and summer cottage for decades.\(^{28}\) Ironically, the Gympie Big Pineapple is now used as an office for the neighbouring service station, and its purpose could be seen to be inching closer to the domestic all the time.

In Noel McKenna’s painting *Big Pineapple, Gympie* the scale of things looks curiously awry. The pineapple itself is gargantuan, embodying the nickname ‘King of Fruit’, and it dominates the whole left hand side of the image, but it’s almost as if all the other elements of the painting contrive to reduce its impressive bulk. This is a pineapple without purpose, adrift in a sea of grey concrete. If there ever were any pineapple fields surrounding this relic they were trampled long ago by the relentless march of suburbia. As a cursory attempt to encourage the eye to linger a little longer on the golden fruit, two parallel white parking lines lead the eye upwards for another passing glance. It’s only really a courtesy though, because other things, although much smaller, vie for attention. Extending out from the lower right hand side of the pineapple like an aberration of nature is a bright red awning and a big red sign spelling out CALTEX in white letters. It’s hard not to look at the bold colours, and harder still not to read the letters. It’s almost a compulsion. A big white traffic arrow curving up from the lower right hand corner of the painting draws attention to it, as does the inverted fishhook of the lamppost just above it.

One can't help but feel sorry for the pineapple, ignored and overshadowed by a building representing the interests of a multinational petroleum company.

If, as Stockwell suggests, Big Things celebrate aspects of the nation's humour, then this one is the butt of a dubious joke. Laughing at it would be akin to finding someone else's misfortunes funny, but maybe that is the point: everybody loves a loser because it reinforces the idea of our own superiority.  

McKenna depicts the Big Pineapple, Gympie as an imposing, yet disregarded, giant. It is similar to The Jones Family Out for a Walk in their Ken Done Outfits, in its use of humour, but the difference between the two works is the use of colour. In the latter painting, the monochromatic greys evoke a dreary, depressing scene, whereas in the former, the guileless blue sky and harmonious pastel palette offer a more nostalgic and less judgemental view. In both works the relatively empty and featureless landscapes reinforce ideas of isolation and abandonment.

As for the other common proposition, that Big Things are Australian icons, one has to wonder what the Big Pineapple and particularly Big Pineapple, Gympie reveals about Australia. Apart from the name Gympie in the title, there is nothing about the pineapple that proves it to be uniquely Australian. McKenna pointedly draws our attention to this gap in logic by depicting the pineapple and its surrounds devoid of any signifiers of Australian culture. The Caltex service station certainly isn't unique to Australia  and neither is road culture. This Big Pineapple could be from anywhere. Is this the deeper meaning that the Big Pineapple proponents were alluding to?

In a catalogue essay for Noel McKenna's Australia exhibition Greg O'Brien wrote:

> ... the enlarged fruits, birds and Scotsmen of Australia stand as objects of faith and pride, symbols around which a community or region is unified. The question remains how these down-home monuments manage to blend such a hopeless, doomed faith with an irrepressible optimism.  

Interestingly, O'Brien's comments reveal the loaded way in which we view Big Things:

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29 'There's a theory that Australia, founded by rejects from British society, is more inclined to celebrate failure than success, with a national holiday devoted to a military fiasco (Anzac Day), a hero killed after bungling a bank robbery (Ned Kelly), an alternative anthem about a sheep thief who commits suicide ("Waltzing Matilda"), and a film industry that keeps making self-critical movies that nobody goes to see.' David Dale, Who We Are: A Miscellany of the New Australia, (Crows Nest, N.S.W.: Allen & Unwin, 2006), p 40.

30 Caltex has branches in 23 African countries, 10 Middle Eastern countries, 6 in South Asia, 9 in South East Asia, as well as Korea and China. They are also in 4 Southern Pacific countries including Australia and New Zealand. Source: http://www.caltex.com/corp/enAVhere.asp (accessed 31/12/06).

optimistic and hopeless in equal measure. Again, it is their scale that is integral to our perception of their possible success or failure.

Stephen Stockwell suggests that ‘... the really interesting thing about what Australia’s done with the big things is how they’ve achieved ... iconic status.’\cite{Stockwell-2003} Knowing how Australia’s Big Things have achieved this would indeed be interesting. Despite Stockwell’s intimation that Australia’s attitude to Big Things is somehow unique, other countries with a reverence for Big Things also think they reveal something distinctive about their country.\cite{Canada} In the United States, makers of a documentary titled World’s Largest claim their work ‘... surveys this distinctly American phenomenon’,\cite{WorldsLargest} a proposition that echoes Stockwell’s sentiments.

A partial explanation may be found if we return again to Critchley who attests that ‘a sense of humour is often what connects us most strongly to a specific place and leads us to predicate characteristics of that place, assigning certain dispositions and customs to its inhabitants.’\cite{Critchley} His statement helps us to understand how humour enables different countries (and regions) to think that Big Things are unique to them.

Returning to Stephen Stockwell’s essay on Big Things, he writes:

Every Big Thing requires a visionary, a post-modern artist with the passion and obsession to realise his or her vision. It is a form of low art, a form of trash culture. But to many who do not frequent galleries and museums, low art is their only available form of art and thus becomes their actual art.\cite{Stockwell-2003}

Stockwell’s proposition has interesting implications for how we view Big Things, especially in regard to their status as art. It’s been suggested that the popularity of Big Things as art and icons can be linked to the advent of Pop Art, of which many comparable examples can be found. Claes Oldenberg and Coosje Van Bruggen are especially renowned for their gigantic objects. Other examples here in Australia include Brett Whiteley’s Almost Once (matches) outside the Art Gallery of New South Wales and Jeff Koons’ Puppy exhibited at the Museum of Contemporary Art in 1995.

\cite{Canada} Canada for example, has an amazing array of Big Things, one website breaking them down into categories to make searching easier. The categories are Birds, Mammals, Other Animals, Fish and Other Aquatic Animals, People, Plants, Processed Foods, Transportation, Other Objects, Static Airplanes, Housing and Murals – Urban Canvases. In the People category, there were sub-headings for Real Historic Figures, Native Americans, Miners, Lumberjacks, Adventurers/ Voyagers, Riders, Fictional Characters/ Santa Claus and Other People. Obviously Canada has a lot of Big Things. Source: http://www.bigthings.ca/bigsubject.html (accessed 23/01/07).
\cite{Critchley} Simon Critchley, On Humour, p 68.
\cite{Stockwell-2003} Dr Stephen Stockwell, ‘Big Things: Larrikinism, Low Art and The Land,’ page x.
Although they are not often attributed, a number of Big Things are also designed and constructed by artists. Sculptor Silvio Apponyi made Goulburn’s Big Merino③ and Big Thing specialist Hugh Anderson built five of Rockhampton’s Bulls as well as ‘the Big Cow at Yandina, the Big Soldier at Uralla and Bathurst’s Gold Panner Man’.⑧ American artist Cameron Cross has gone one step further and has undertaken a project to paint all seven of Van Gogh’s famous sunflower paintings in symbolic sites around the world. The town of Emerald in Queensland boasts one of them and also lays claim to being the home of the world’s biggest easel, a massive steel structure approximately 25 metres high upon which sits the 7 x 10 metre sunflower painting. Regardless of what one may think of Cross’ conceptual premise, the idea of using what is frequently regarded as a low art medium to pay homage to a famous high art one is an interesting idea. As these examples demonstrate, the distinction between ‘high’ and ‘low’ art is often blurred.

Occasionally ‘high’ art accidentally joins the ranks of ‘low’ art, evidenced by the many examples of unloved and unappreciated public sculpture, looked at with scorn by the general public and only occasionally with fondness, if thought about at all. When well-known sculptor Ken Unsworth was commissioned to make an artwork for inner city Darlinghurst he came up with Stones Against the Sky. The piece was quickly derided by the public and garnered the nicknames ‘Poo on sticks’ and ‘the poo sticks’. The nicknames are unfortunately entirely accurate: the sculpture truly does resemble an oversize set of sticks adorned with blobs of sticky brown poo. Stones Against the Sky has inadvertently become an honorary Big Thing, with poo worthy of Gulliver. It’s the city cousin of Robertson’s Big Turd. In this case, ‘high’ art has been demoted to ‘low’ art by the public. Sadly though, the work remains in a kind of no-mans land. Not publicly lauded for it’s Big Poo status means you can’t buy the pre-requisite snow

⑧ David Clark, Big Things, p 10.
domes, tea towels or plethora of bathroom related products that an entrepreneurial mind could spawn, and as ‘high’ art it seems to have been politely overlooked, perhaps the artistic equivalent of having something slimy and green stuck in your teeth. It also shares another trait of Big Things: combining optimism and disappointment in equal measure.39

Stones Against the Sky brings to mind Gulliver’s adventures in Lilliput; as a new arrival his gargantuan size is lauded and put to good use by the ambitious Lilliputians, but his stay is plagued by the needs of his body. His hosts struggle to find enough food and the issue of waste management is another problem altogether. The turning point comes and the seeds of his downfall are sown when a disastrous fire sweeps through the Queen’s chambers and a sleep-befuddled, inebriated yet resourceful Gulliver pisses on the flames, putting out the fire and reducing the palace to a smouldering urinal as a consequence. While Big may be heroic, inspiring and revered, the sentiment does not extend to faecal matter and bodily waste. (As a footnote to the story of the Poo Sticks, Unsworth, forever daubed by his creation, has repainted the stones grey).

Unsworth appears to have maintained a good sense of humour in regard to Stones Against the Sky. When asked about Stones in interview by Lenny Ann Low for the Sydney Morning Herald he responded with a Cleese-like ‘Don’t mention the war’. Lenny Ann Low, ‘Metropolitan – Exhibition set in stone realises a celebrated sculptor’s work’, The Sydney Morning Herald, 1 May 2003.
LAST LAUGH

While some drivers . . . may believe they are hallucinating . . . what they are in fact witnessing is one of the many tongue-in-cheek constructions cartooning the air around the country.  

A journey around Australia’s Big Things is bound to raise a few laughs; in fact you can almost take your pick. You can laugh in incredulous horror at the audacity of those who prefer ‘quantity to quality’, you can laugh in surprise at the unexpected sight of a giant fruit or over-sized bowel movement, or you might just laugh with delight at the wacky motivation that saw the realisation of a Big Thing.

These familiar landmarks are already well established in Australian consciousness. The humour in them is apparent by the simple fact of the incongruity of what they are.

FIG. 9. Noel McKenna, They Grow Them Bigger Down Here (Tasmania)

PHYSICALLY BIG

It would seem that McKenna has been toying with the idea of Big Things for years. A 1991 painting titled They Grow Them Bigger Down Here (Tasmania) depicts a giant apple precariously perched on the back of a flatbed truck. The scale in the painting is confusing: the apple is big enough to be the sole cargo of the truck, but it also completely dwarfs a man who stands looking. Things are not as they seem. The dreamy non-descript landscape acts to focus on the apple, truck and man but fails to offer solutions as to why things are so strangely disproportionate. Visually, it is a very surreal image, but when read alongside McKenna’s more recent paintings of Big Things it starts to seem kind of

normal. The truck and apple could easily be another Big Thing, the man a disillusioned tourist, or it could also be an inflated memory of Tasmania's golden years as the export Apple Isle.

An inordinate number of Big Things are food based, and considering we've been on the road for a while now, it's hard not to think about them in terms of hunger. Big Things are a mimetic form of advertising, so it comes as something of a surprise that so many Big Things are removed from their agricultural origins. McKenna's painting *Big Strawberry, Redlands, Queensland* is no exception. The dominant feature of the work is a large red strawberry lying slumped on a flat green plane of grass with no clues or intimations as to what it is doing there. A man dressed in grey stands underneath the drooping stem, but he appears oblivious to his surroundings, staring fixedly ahead. His presence functions to suggest the scale of the scene but in fact only confuses it further.

*Big Strawberry, Redlands, Queensland* contains elements of a still life painting and we could even read the image as a detail from a still life. The sandy looking path at the front of the picture plane could be the lip of a table, the grass a laminex tabletop, the low rise of the distant hills rumpled green cloth and the grey sky draped fabric. The perspective McKenna has used in this painting means that as viewers we are up close and almost inside the picture plane, as if we were crouching at the edge of the table, our eyes at the same height as the strawberry. The key point of this painting is the confused sense of scale: the grey man appears to be miniscule – antlike – while the strawberry remains closer to its real life size than to its size as a Big Thing.
In his book *Looking at the Overlooked: Four Essays on Still Life Painting* Norman Bryson writes that 'Still life is unimpressed by the categories of achievement, grandeur or the unique. The human subject that it proposes and assumes is anonymous and creatural, cut off from splendour and from singularity.'\(^{41}\) His words are pertinent to McKenna's vision of the Big Strawberry and its indifference to the triumphs of the agricultural and consumable world. There is nothing grand about the strawberry and the studied indifference of the man seems to be somewhere past boredom and apathy.

Bryson also notes: 'All men must eat, even the great; there is a levelling of humanity, a humbling of aspiration before an irreducible fact of life, hunger.'\(^{42}\) But this isn't a painting about food and hunger, despite fruit being the ostensible subject, and an initial impression of the grey man eyeing up the eating potential of the strawberry. This is a painting about the incongruity of inverted scale and the resulting confusion.

Bryson continues on to claim 'what is abolished in still life is the subject's access to *distinction*. The subject is not only exiled physically: the scale of values on which narrative is based is erased also.'\(^{43}\) His observations are particularly (and surprisingly) apposite to McKenna's Big Thing paintings in which he uses a deliberately distorted sense of scale to question the value of the object. In *Big Strawberry* the fruit is the focus but there is no meaning or purpose to its disproportionate scale. The lack of detail in the landscape surrounding the strawberry also evokes a sense of confusion at the authenticity of the depicted world.

Succinctly summarising McKenna's paintings, Gregory O'Brien observed that: 'Striking an appropriately enigmatic note, the imagery functions as a catalyst or vehicle for the viewer's own response. It is the absence of overt narrative in these inherently 'narrative' paintings which forces such an imaginatively engagement.'\(^{44}\) Indeed the only clue McKenna provides to interpret his images are the titles, and even they can add to the ambiguity rather than clarifying it.

When visiting Darren Knight Gallery I saw a painting by McKenna leaning up against one of the walls in the backroom. It wasn't part of a current exhibition, maybe it was just waiting to be picked up, perhaps it had just been shown to a prospective buyer. Whatever the purpose of its placement, it was a very striking way to look at the work. Measuring 60 x 80 cm the painting features a brown and white cow against a backdrop of blue sky, green grass and low green hills. A staircase and ramp lead up to the rear.


\(^{42}\) Ibid.

\(^{43}\) Ibid.

\(^{44}\) Gregory O'Brien, 'Noel McKenna: Changing the Light,' *Noel McKenna* (Richmond, VIC.: Niagara Galleries, 1999).
flank of the cow and a man stands in front of the black rectangle of the open doorway. When I began writing about this painting weeks after first seeing it, I completely forgot about the presence of the man and indeed the stairs and ramp for that matter. In my mind I could not recall any elements in the work that provided a scale to measure the size of the cow against and I think this might have occurred because I was struck by the realisation that from my vantage I was most definitely the Big Thing, and I was looking at a miniature cow. Susan Stewart writes that 'In the representation of the gigantic within the public space it is ... important that the gigantic be situated above and over, that the transcendent position be denied the viewer.'

In this instance, the role of Big Thing had been reversed: firstly, while the Big Cow is gigantic in 'real' life, it has been rendered physically small in paint and then further reduced again by my towering presence. This relationship was exaggerated much more than usual; instead of sitting on the floor and leaning against the wall, the work would normally be displayed at eye height, thereby allowing the viewer to visually enter the world of the Big Thing, where imagination offers an entry point to the work as well as a relationship with the subject within the space it inhabits.

45 Susan Stewart, On Longing, p 89.
Stewart observes that 'we know the gigantic only partially'. The gigantic overwhelms us, we are surrounded by it in the same way that we are surrounded by nature and as such we can never see all of it. But in McKenna’s paintings of Big Things he provides a way to know the gigantic more completely: by rendering it in scaled-down 2D form, we can know all of what we see. By painting his Big Things in settings devoid of specific and recognisable features McKenna also pares back the emotional response Big Things elicit, be they positive or negative.

When I returned to looking at an image of Big Cow, Yandina, Queensland instead of just recalling it in memory I was immediately struck by the presence of the man, and ramp, and stairs, so much so that I wondered how I could have possibly overlooked them. I went back and looked at other Big Thing paintings by McKenna and realised he uses an element to suggest scale in every work, be it a figure, man made feature or landscape. I had been so persistently overwhelmed by ideas of the big and gigantic and how ideas of large scale translated into miniature that I didn’t really pay much attention to McKenna’s suggestions of scale. I think that perhaps I also viewed McKenna’s paintings as fundamentally still, the objects in them frozen and permanently static, places so contained that the world does not exist outside their borders.

What distinguishes McKenna’s Big Things is the under-whelming response their size inspires. Susan Stewart observes that ‘... both the miniature and the gigantic may be described through metaphors of containment – the miniature as contained, the gigantic as container.’ In McKenna’s paintings his Big Things represent both metaphors of containment: the Big Thing as an object is contained within itself, but the Big Thing still functions as a container of the values it represents.

McKenna’s paintings of Big Things are paradoxical representations in which the boundaries between what we see and what we know are blurred between the two. We know that we are looking at a representation of a real thing, an object physically gigantic in comparison to us, but when we look at the painting, we are physically big in comparison to the image of the object. The relationships are constantly being inverted, swapping back and forth so that we take on the roles of both the gigantic and the miniature. His paintings are the culmination of multiple layers of reproduction – starting with a simple object that becomes a Big Thing, then a photo of a Big Thing, then the source of a photo of a Big Thing, then a painting of a photo of a Big Thing which started as a small thing. It gets confusing.

Reviewer Ashley Crawford claimed of McKenna that ‘The irony is that he depicts gigantic objects within a cosy scale.’ McKenna does more than that: he presents Big

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47 Ibid.
Things in a scale that could momentarily appear cosy, before subverting the illusion with probing questions that elicit more disquiet than comfort.

Susan Stewart observes that ‘Although the miniature makes the body gigantic, the gigantic transforms the body into miniature, especially pointing to the body’s “toylike” and “insignificant” aspects.’ In McKenna’s paintings of Big Things as small things, the situation is reversed. The viewer becomes gigantic and the objects in the paintings become ‘toylike’ and ‘insignificant’. Gregory O’Brien also addresses this idea, noting that:

    Here, the ... [Big Thing] is back to being 30 centimetres again and all the other exaggerated presences are shrunk down to painting-size. Any sense of their original real-life size is long gone. It is the dreamy purposelessness and absurdity of these creations which McKenna underlines, his paintings running counter to the impulse that put the huge ‘sculptures’ there in the first place.

Just down the imaginary road from the Big Orange is the Giant Koala of Dadswells Bridge, Victoria. In Noel McKenna’s painting Big Koala, Dadswell Creek the koala, although labelled with a sign as Giant, is anything but. At best, it might be approximately the same size as a juvenile koala, but more likely a fluffy toy version of a ‘koala bear’.

50 Greg O’Brien, ‘Real Life Replica.’
Somewhat ironically 'there's not a real koala to be seen', which makes one wonder if the Koala should get a prize for the best example of embodied optimism in the Big Thing genre, but the problem is that it doesn't look optimistic so much as menacing. If food based Big Things make one think of eating, then this one makes one think of being eaten. The Giant Koala hulks, eyes wide open, claws outstretched and a thin-lipped smirk daring you to come closer, challenging you to ignore the empty car park, ominously devoid of cars and tour buses. This is an intimidating koala and it would seem that the surrounding landscape is empty for very good reason.

In this painting the shift in scale has been clearly addressed. Although McKenna has foregone the inclusion of a figure to suggest the scale of the Big Thing in relation to the body, he has used other markers, such as the sign in the carpark guiding visitors the parking area, to imply the sense of size. By painting the scene devoid of people the hulking presence of the Giant Koala gains further exaggeration but also calls into question the legitimacy of its 'Giant' claim. As the viewer, we are giants looking at a small koala, but the painted 'Giant Koala' sign suggests otherwise.

Noel McKenna manipulates our relation to big and small in his paintings of Big Things, but he also plays with the same ideas in a much more oblique fashion in other works. For example in his recent exhibition From Watsons Bay to Waterloo McKenna included a monochromatic grey painting of a small motorboat bearing the name Serial Killer. It

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51 David Clark, *Big Things*, p 147.
is a very odd image: ambiguity coupled with a definitive statement. Is the boat the serial killer, a destroyer of fish and marine life? Is the owner of the boat a serial killer, and if they are why say it? Maybe the boat belongs to Chopper Reid. Whatever the reason behind the peculiar name, it is interesting because it doesn’t seem to fit. The name and its plethora of associated meanings are too big for the small size of the boat. It is an example of a big thing presented as a small thing, with no clear reason or explanation as to why. Adrift on a pearly sea of streaky paint, Serial Killer, Watsons Bay resides in the same strangely featureless world as McKenna’s Big Things.

McKenna observed that: ‘You would not be able to name your racehorse, Serial Killer, but it seems you can use this name for your boat.’ In a strange way, Serial Killer belongs in the same distended realm as Big Things and could almost be a weekend runabout for the Big Koala.

Writing in response to McKenna’s Big Things, Jane Creighton observed that ‘The plays on scale emphasise the relationship between the momentary and the momentous, offering a fresh take on ordinary incidents.’ Her words have equal application to a work such as Serial Killer. McKenna’s paintings take note of the extraordinary nature of everyday things. McKenna himself has said: ‘I have a general philosophy that the things that I do just come from everyday life and you do find strange things in everyday life.’

In the catalogue essay to the exhibition At the Threshold of the Visible: Miniscule and Small-Scale Art, 1964–1996 the curator Ralph Rugoff writes about the importance of scale in art, observing the status that large-scale works attract. He says:

For much of this century [20th], expressive power in art was correlated with impressive size... a monumental aesthetic evolved and endured, with gargantuan size assuming a range of connotations from heroic and public to sublime and spectacular.

The idea that gargantuan size can connote the heroic has interesting implications for Big Things in general, and Australia’s Big Things in particular if we bear in mind our history in this country and how we have often chosen to represent ourselves as triumphing over elements such as the landscape, geographic isolation and people. Stockwell somewhat humorously talks about this, saying ‘We’ve got this big... terrifyingly empty space and

52 Noel McKenna, From Watsons Bay to Waterloo (Sydney: Darren Knight Gallery, 2006).
54 Ashley Crawford, ‘Artistic Differences’.
the big things are this . . . attempt to assert that . . . we can match the dimensions of the land.56

The Big Captain Cook in Cairns is a good example of an Australian heroic Big Thing. We don’t in fact have many Big Things of people, although we do have two of Ned Kelly: one in Glenrowan and one rather incongruously in Maryborough. Along with the two Neds, the Big Captain Cook shares the distinction of being the only Big Thing in Australia to be made after a real person. It could be argued that Big Captain Cook is the most culturally relevant Big Thing in Australia. It might not be the most aesthetically pleasing representation of Cook, but his presence functions as a reminder of all that has come to pass since he made his ‘discovery’. From his street-side vantage point he could almost be pointing to the reefs on which his vessel foundered. The ongoing saga regarding the redevelopment of Cook’s site and the subsequent confusion about what will happen to him is an example of how we regard our icons in a somewhat cavalier manner – using them when we need them. Rather than advertising a product, the Big Captain Cook is suggestive of monuments to explorers who died far from home while attempting to discover and conquer the great unknown.

56 Dr Stephen Stockwell, interview by George Negus on George Negus Tonight.
As Stockwell suggests, Big Things attempt to demonstrate our dominance over the land, but they also fulfil a more contemplative function, similar to memorials of all shapes and sizes. Lisanne Gibson and Joanna Besley observe that:

Obelisks, cairns, rocks, clocks, plaques, gates, fountains and gardens dedicated to settlement and ... the spirit of pioneer life are found all over the state[QLD.]. The formal simplicity of many of these objects emphasises that, for the people who erect them, the act of remembering is often more important than the qualities or materiality of the object itself – in many cases the object simply serves the function of 'X marks the spot'.

Gibson and Besley’s ideas have equal application for Big Things; despite their attention grabbing size, it is what they represent that is significant. Big Things ‘remember’ developments in the community and their size is just an attention seeking strategy.

BIG ART FOR EVERYONE

Any big thing really requires some visionary. In a way, they’re like artists. They’re like ... your postmodern artist. And I think we should treat them as artists ... because they really need to have the passion and the obsession of an artist ... to realise their vision.

In Australia, a Big Thing doesn’t necessarily have to be physically Big. For example, sport is huge in Australia, a metaphorical Big Thing that far outstrips the more literal Big Things in terms of impact and influence.

In his 2003 exhibition Australia, Noel McKenna included images that covered both types of Big – the physically Big, and the conceptually Big. McGrath – Sarwan Spat is a painting that fits into the latter category, a visual depiction of an alleged famous sporting moment – one I can only assume was meant to happen off camera – describing in paint the scene of the confrontation as well as transcript of the conversation. As someone who has no idea about the rules and rituals of cricket, I find McGrath – Sarwan Spat a confusing image. Visually, it is obviously a work about trouble. The figures of the two cricketers are outlined in white against a stormy grey background that permeates all

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57 Lisanne Gibson and Joanna Besley, Monumental Queensland: Signposts on a Cultural Landscape, p 69.

58 Interestingly, while the size of a memorial might seem small it is worth considering it in relation to what it represents. For example the humble rock monument dedicated to “‘Destructo’, [the] champion racing cockroach, accidentally killed at this track (24-8-80) after winning the challenge stakes against “Wooden Head”, champion racing lizard 1980.’ is a gigantic monument for such a small creature. From looking at photographs I would judge it to be no taller than 50cm. Source: Lisanne Gibson and Joanna Besley, Monumental Queensland: Signposts on a Cultural Landscape, p 170.

59 Dr Stephen Stockwell, interview by George Negus on George Negus Tonight.
but the brown and pink flesh of their arms, heads and Sarwan’s cricket bat. McGrath is depicted frontally, towering over Sarwan in a pose of repressed anger, fists clenched at his sides and a halo hovering above his head while Sarwan looks up at him seemingly nonplussed. Below the image is a painted transcript of the altercation that reads:

Glen [sic] McGrath to Ramnaresh Sarwan. 'What does Brian Lara’s d... taste like'. Sarwan replied 'I don’t know, ask your wife'. McGrath Replied 'If you ever f...... mention my wife again, I’ll f...... rip your f...... throat out.'

After the incident it was revealed that McGrath’s behaviour stemmed from his concern for his wife Jane, who had just recently discovered that she had secondary cancer after beating breast cancer six years previously.60 The story helps to justify the cricketer’s behaviour at the time, but the confusing thing about McKenna’s McGrath – Sarwan Spat is not why they had the argument but the question of why McGrath is adorned with a halo. Is it because in the eyes of the public he is implicitly superior to Sarwan and can do no wrong? Does race play a part? The skin of the cricketers and the bat are the only coloured areas in the painting and it’s clear the two men come from different racial backgrounds. Does the halo symbolise McKenna’s feelings for the cricketer? In an interview on the television show Enough Rope, Andrew Denton asked Jane McGrath if she had discussed the incident with her husband, to which she replied: ‘You know, I did. I said, “Thank you. Thank you for defending me and standing up for me.” And that

is the way I would hope any man that loved his wife or partner or child would react."61 McGrath's halo could be a symbol of his family-friendly heroics.

However, there is a much more obvious explanation to the work. Sportspeople are so highly revered in Australia that the best of them are frequently referred to as icons and gods. Often when a player has been accused of bad behaviour (be it drugs, drinking, verbal abuse, physical abuse, rape) the defence is that they didn't know better because normal social conventions don't apply to them in the same way that they do for other people. It would appear that sports devotees are inured against social transgressions of all kinds, hence McGrath keeping his halo in true icon fashion. As Don Watson has suggested: 'in the new Aussie icon Aussies see confirmation of their strengths'62 and not their weaknesses. The murky grey background and its sense of repressed emotional volatility is as far as the criticism goes. Greg O'Brien observes that: 'This painting underlines the fact that the best cricketers in the world are basically the same species as the Berri Orange. Both inhabit the same distorted world.'63

It's easy to imagine a Big Cricketer standing next to a servo, a nightclub, brewery or brothel, somewhere prominent but only tangentially related to his sporting purpose, something akin to the Gympie Big Pineapple and the Caltex Service Station. Passing tourists would stop and buy stickers and tea towels and bottle openers shaped like cricket bats. The idea of a Big Cricketer isn't too far off the mark: in 2006 Cricketing Australia aired a series of advertisements on British television featuring a Big Warnie statue en route to Picadilly Circus as warm up for the Ashes to show the Brits what they were in for.64 It might just be a matter of time before the idea catches hold here.

In his essay Kings of Kitsch Big Things John Cross notes that

> The spectacle of the Big Thing often oversteps the role of a site ma(r)ker and becomes the site or sight of significance. In a classic kitsch manoeuvre, the marker is of more interest than the thing that is being signalled. The Big Banana is more revered than the genuine bananas around it.65

The same principle could easily be applied to sportspeople whose escalating fame makes them 'bigger' than the game they play. Warne and Bradman are two clear examples of players who symbolise so much about cricket that they have almost superseded the game itself.

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61 Jane McGrath, interview by Andrew Denton on Enough Rope with Andrew Denton.
63 Greg O'Brien, 'Real Life Replica.'
65 John Cross, 'Kings of Kitsch: Big Things,' Artlink Vol 15, No 4, p 50.
The inclusion of *McGrath – Sarwan Spat* and its shift into conceptually big opens up a whole new realm of possibility for how Big Things are viewed and for what actually constitutes a Big Thing. In his *Australia* exhibition McKenna also included the painting *Picasso Crescent*, which Greg O’Brien notes brings modernism to suburbia by way of angular lines and blocks of colour. As McKenna no doubt noticed, the juxtaposition of Picasso, an art giant, and a suburban street make for interesting possibilities of interpretation.

It’s interesting that Big Things can work so well but making a small Big Thing of an even bigger thing doesn’t necessarily mean success. Years ago the Leyland Brothers built a replica Uluru on the Pacific Highway, investing millions of dollars in the project. I don’t know how long it stayed open but the last time I saw it security fences blocked off all entrances. It could have been a savvy ploy to add to its allure; for example, making it more appealing by forbidding it, but I doubt it. The little Big Uluru was a bad joke before it was even built. I’ve never been to the real Uluru but my impression of it is as a giant monolith becalmed in a sea of sand and rock, adorned with all the vividly changing colours of the desert. In comparison, the Little Big Uluru has all the grace and grandeur of Robertson’s Big Potato. Perhaps its failure was partly due to size: it wasn’t huge like the real thing, and it wasn’t small enough to qualify as a miniature. It was just average, and the real thing is anything but. Nonetheless, the Little Big Uluru demonstrates the desirability of recreating something big and famous for your own.

Countless gardens across the country bear testament to the kind of thinking that spawned the Little Big Uluru. Every town proudly displays examples of do-it-yourself ingenuity: rubber tire swans, topiary hedges, strange scrap metal animals and architectural follies. In Corrimal NSW, Joe Harriman has constructed miniature replicas of Luna Park, the Opera House and Sydney Harbour Bridge in the front yard of his neat home.66

Harriman’s house and garden are the subject of a painting by Noel McKenna titled *Home, Wollongong, NSW*. McKenna has painted a version of Harriman’s embellished suburban home but with only the miniature Sydney Harbour Bridge adorning the front lawn. Painted in monochromatic greys, the reproduced image has the feel of a newspaper clipping. In some ways the harsh grey palette could suggest the bleakness and boredom of suburbia but it equally suggests a nostalgic box-brownie vision of optimistic resourcefulness. The house itself is rendered with almost childlike simplicity, two windows and a door on the front façade, another two windows along the side. A tiny aerial peeping over the roofline fractures the ingenuousness of the scene. Compositionally the house sits firmly in the upper half of the picture plane; dark greys

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and black making it a brooding presence. The Harbour Bridge on the other hand, is a piece of whimsy, momentarily touching down like a butterfly in the front yard. *Home, Wollongong, NSW* conveys the personality and individuality of an otherwise anonymous suburban home in much the same way that Big Things single out their sites from their surroundings.

Little Big Things and garden art are examples of an improvised resourcefulness that enables ordinary people to create individual and unique visions of their own, frequently in a folk art or unschooled style. McKenna shares some of the same naïve aesthetic in his work, which I would argue is one of the major reasons why audiences find him so appealing. His art is popular as much for its idiosyncratic style as it is for its subject matter. Although clearly thought out and well executed, the apparent simplicity of his work comes across as being friendly and approachable. Writer Jane Creighton notes that McKenna 'combines his understanding of Classical composition and perspective with the sensibility of the folk artist [and] his iconography has the immediacy of a cartoon.'67 She also observes that 'McKenna's is a laconic vision that engenders disquiet and hope.'68 Focussing on the pathos of everyday oddities is something that McKenna does well, and even if a subject didn't appear to be odd before it caught his attention, it certainly would after. Reviewer Pip Cummings wrote that

> *His style has been described as conceptual, metaphysical, naïve and – by McKenna himself – as realistic. It also owes something to surrealism's magnification of 'the marvellous in the everyday', a practice that aimed to evoke the strangeness of familiar things.*69

McKenna achieves more than just evoking the strangeness of the familiar, he invests it with a depth that can at times be seen as humorous, optimistic, depressing and

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67 Jane Creighton, 'Noel McKenna.'
68 Ibid.
sometimes verging on unkind. The example of *Home, Wollongong, NSW* is a case in point: the monochrome greys simplify and pare back the extraneous information from the scene while simultaneously painting it as a depressing suburban wasteland where even the presence of a fanciful bridge manages to look a bit pathetic.

*Home, Wollongong, NSW* signals a shift away from McKenna’s relatively straightforward representations of Big Things and into the conceptually Big. As *Home, Wollongong, NSW* has intimated McKenna has a strong interest in the bigger tenets of cultural identity that shape our values.

In *Big Mower, Beerwah, QLD* a man stands impassively surveying a giant lawn mower elevated on a pedestal of criss-crossing steel beams. He looks at it with a complete lack of wonder or awe, epitomising the total opposite of thunder struck. He stares absentmindedly at the mower as if it were a banal archaeological relic from a long dead civilisation, something to peruse while he perhaps thinks about other, more important things. The redundancy of the mower is reinforced by its surroundings – the concrete slab on which it stands, an almost empty car park, a small patch of grass, and behind a tall fence, hills so jaggedly lumpy that they would defy the best efforts of even the most valiant mower. The man stands too close to the lawn mower to take all the details in, adding to the sense that he is looking through and beyond what he sees, but conversely, it is he himself who blends into the landscape. He is a partially there man, his head and...
legs minimally rendered while his upper body is merely a black outline against the grey ground. Both the man and the carpark are consistently grey, a contrast to the bright and cheery greens, reds, blues and blue-greys of the mower and its surrounds. The grey man in his grey carpark implies that perhaps he is the boring and banal presence but his posture and colouring also hint at the boredom and sense of anti-climax the sights inspire.

*Big Mower, Beerwah, QLD* is perhaps the most recognisably ‘Aussie’ of McKenna’s Big Things. Lawn mowers are already culturally big in their own right, and could be described as icons symbolising the great Australian dream of homeownership. Lawn mowers – and the act of mowing – are part of our national identity; the familiar sounds of the rumbling motors and the smell of fresh cut grass are synonymous with summer. As an indicator of their place in the Australian psyche, the opening ceremony of the Sydney Olympic Games featured a horde of busy suburbanites pushing lawn mowers around the stadium. Somewhat ironically for an Australian icon, the Big Mower in Beerwah isn’t even truly endemic to the country. It isn’t an ingenious local response to the greedy demands of suburbia; it’s an import, branded by the word HONDA painted across the front of the engine.

Don Watson contends that ‘...where the old icons reminded the faithful of their relative weaknesses, in the new Aussie icon Aussies see confirmation of their strengths. The Aussie icon is, as one would expect, an enhanced icon.’70 His thoughts help to explain the ready embrace of anything big – be it a person, an ideal or a physical object – as Australian icons; the only qualification is that it must support the quest for national identity in some way.

Compared to the grandeur of our big icons, and the Big Mower in particular, *The Lawn Mower* by Noel McKenna is a more humble and understated response to an iconic pastime, where even the size of the painting is modest, measuring just 66 x 39cms. The simple painting depicts a man mowing the grass. The edge of a house is visible and some non-descript bushes are massed at the edge of the lawn. The image is rendered in a monochromatic range of green and grey, which effectively assigns all the elements of the scene equal value and importance. The title of the work is a play on both the object and the person,

70 Don Watson, ‘Comment,’ p 12, 14.
clearly suggesting a symbiotic relationship between the two. It depicts the act and not just the symbol, thus acknowledging the roles of both the icon and the devotee and the merging of the two. In comparison to McKenna's painting *Big Mower, Beerwah* and its depiction of an underwhelming response to a Big Thing regardless of its possible icon status, *The Lawn Mower* represents the shared familiarity of everyday icons.

In the catalogue essay *Noel McKenna: Changing the Light* Greg O'Brien made an astute observation of McKenna's paintings, noting that

> Just as they refuse to articulate specific narrative content, the works are ambiguous in their mood. The paintings often appear frozen between two quite distinct emotions embodying transitional states between, for instance, cheerfulness and ennui, anxiety and black humour, contentment and boredom. The paintings also find themselves at the point at which childhood topples helplessly into adulthood.\(^\text{71}\)

His words provide a key for understanding why McKenna's style is so well suited to Big Things which in themselves present an equal array of contradictions: low versus high culture, trash versus art, eyesore versus 'embodied optimism'.

In McKenna's *Big Things, Australia* map, the pictures of Big Things read like loosely-collated photos from a road trip, randomly arranged to give an overall impression of the amazing sights that have been seen. Displayed this way the contrast between the Big Thing and the landscape is even more pronounced than usual: McKenna's Big Things are left marooned and isolated, anchored by empty servos, empty buildings, empty carparks and empty streets, in much the same way *Home, Wollongong, NSW* is isolated in – and by – suburbia. Given that the purpose of Big Things is to attract tourists, these ones seemed to have failed miserably. There are less than thirty people in the picture and even then they appear as a guide to scale rather than as simple tourists. The proliferation of Bigs seems to have subsumed the industries and communities that spawned them. *Big Things, Australia* depicts the paradox of tourist attractions that hold little or no attraction that are instead beset by indifferent vacuity.

Reviewer Dominique Angeloro noted that it was 'The endearingly naïve painterly style and attention to detail – McKenna signatures – [that] give *Big Things, Australia* the laboured feel of a primary-school project.'\(^\text{72}\) Although McKenna's work offers the superficial impression of naivety it actually masks much deeper – and at times, seemingly cynical – observations of his subjects.

\(^{71}\) Gregory O'Brien, 'Noel McKenna: Changing the Light.'

In his essay *Artistic Differences* Ashley Crawford asked McKenna how he researched his objects, to which he replied ‘I got my wife to get on the internet and search for big things.” The virtual searching of McKenna’s wife has enabled us to undertake an abridged tour of Big Things as found on his *Big Things, Australia* map. The beauty of McKenna’s map lies in its ability to question the order of the things, which in turn encourages us to chart places that hold their own personal relevance or significance. Sometimes the map itself is enough, as demonstrated by Max Kairl of Goolwa, South Australia. Kairl carved a map of Australia into his front lawn, adorning it with plant and animal symbols for each state and white boundary lines marking the borders. It needs mowing once a fortnight and the only thing that doesn’t get moved is the replica Uluru.

Anne Ryan observed that ‘The human urge to control the environment through classification and naming is explored in McKenna’s series of Australian maps.” McKenna’s innate sense of questioning the order of things is apparent in his *Big Things, Australia* map where the random placement of Big Things and the confusing strands of directional arrows counteract and obfuscate the importance of Big Things as the symbolic site markers of a specific regions’ identity, but in doing so, the map itself becomes the symbolic site. The map represents the sum of the meanings and values of Big Things, presenting their idiosyncrasies as national traits.

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73 Ashley Crawford, ‘Artistic Differences.’

74 Jennifer Isaacs *Quirky Gardens*, p 146.

INTRODUCTION

Several years ago I visited the stockrooms of Ray Hughes Gallery to seek out work by Glenn Morgan. I was taken upstairs in the temperamental lift and shown through several crowded rooms that housed a treasure trove of artworks by many different artists before being left alone to have a closer look. I was excited to find an extensive range of Morgan's unique movable diorama-style constructions scattered throughout the rooms. One of the stockrooms was so packed that I had to squeeze through a very narrow and congested aisle in order to see Morgan's pieces and even then to get a better view I had to hold my camera in the general direction and take photos to see what I couldn't physically reach. Despite my best attempts to get closer to the work, my furtive prying revealed only tantalising glimpses and at no point was I able to see an artwork in its entirety. In another room an artwork was situated in front of a giant crab that appeared to be contemplating the prospect of such unlikely looking food. Other works were leaning randomly against walls, or stacked on top of other works. At first, I was a bit horrified that the 'sanctity' of art could be disregarded in such a cavalier manner, but now in retrospect it actually seems very appropriate in regard to Morgan's work. My first encounter transformed me from a passive to an active viewer: staring with voyeuristic fascination at the miniature worlds on offer, while deliberately turning the cranks and handles to find out even more.

Glenn Morgan sets out to make work that can be enjoyed through touch.76 In order to achieve this, he has developed a highly idiosyncratic and unique style to create a new hybridised form of kinetic art that combines elements of sculpture, diorama, automata, and painting. Morgan's art is a two-way process; he constructs it and paints it and puts it all together, but in order to complete an artwork, a viewer is needed to turn the crank to bring the story to life.

Most closely related to dioramas and dollhouses, Morgan's art invites playful interaction from the viewer and to imagine themselves within a space that they cannot physically enter. The way in which one is required to look at the work becomes almost as deliberate as physical touch. One doesn't just 'look', one peers, and peruses, and pries.

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76 Michael Fox, 'Morgan & Tate: An Introduction,' in not a law firm – Morgan & Tate (Brisbane, QLD.: Fox Galleries 2004), p 2.
and sometimes possibly even ogles. Looking becomes an act of deliberate participation on part of the viewer, and the kinetic design of Morgan's work also invites the viewer to 'look with their hands' as well as their eyes and imaginations.

Glenn Morgan's artwork is intrinsically interactive and requires a direct experience to fully appreciate its many varied subtleties. While photographs provide a limited visual description they are unable to replace a first-person experience, and in order to circumvent this problem and to convey the experiential nature of the work, this chapter has been structured around a series of descriptive anecdotes recounting my own observations and experiences of his work. This form of descriptive analysis has been an invaluable tool for evaluating the layered conceptual meanings within the works as well as focussing on the plethora of small details. It has also been useful in surmounting the limitations of photographic reproductions.

Glenn Morgan creates work in response to a truly eclectic range of subjects, covering themes such as sport, sex, politics, mental health issues, social justice, animal welfare, community issues and events, side shows, family history, holidays, disease and death. For the purposes of this research, I have focussed on ten artworks that relate directly to a sensory experience of the self, arranged in loose themes of the self-portrait; sex; sensory expectation of smell and sound; death and beyond. The progression of the work also charts a transition from an exuberant, extroverted experience of life through to a more introverted and introspective understanding.

Throughout this chapter I will explore Morgan's artwork against theories and aesthetics of the dollhouse, the diorama and the miniature, qualities that are intrinsic to his work. In my analysis of these qualities I will make extensive use of Susan Stewart's theories on the miniature and the dollhouse as found in her book *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection*. I will also make use of Toby Kamps and Ralph Rugoff's reflections on the diorama, compiled for the exhibition *Small World: Dioramas in Contemporary Art*.

Susan Stewart argues that dollhouses are metonymic for property and the self. This is particularly apposite in terms of Glenn Morgan's work because his subjects are physical manifestations of memories and stories from his own life and experiences, encapsulated in dollhouse (and diorama) form.

Similarly, Toby Kamps argues that the diorama is used to challenge our skills of perception in what is a uniquely visceral experience, activating a physical response that flat images and isolated sculptures cannot. Again, this is relevant to Morgan given the

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experiential nature of the work and the way in which it both engages and challenges our perception of the physical and conceptual modes of engagement.

Throughout this chapter I will argue that Morgan’s work consistently transcends the limitations of the dollhouse and the diorama by drawing attention to and focussing on the physical senses of the body (and thereby the self). The artworks discussed in this chapter chart a journey through experiences of sex, intimacy, smell, sound, death and love. I will demonstrate how Morgan uses these themes in combination with the physicality of his work as a means of offering a heightened sensory and imaginative engagement with his work to the viewer.

FIG. 19. Glenn Morgan, *After Midnight*

ALL THE WORLD’S A STAGE

*What’s on the box? – After Midnight*

Aside from the stockrooms, there are a number of display rooms at Ray Hughes and it was in one of these that several of Morgan’s more conventional pictures were hung. I started my looking with a piece titled *After Midnight*. The work is a three-dimensional wall-based painting which has a crank on the side that the viewer can turn to animate the interior. *After Midnight* is a good place to start looking at Morgan’s work, because like most of his works, it combines a number of media to create a hybrid form of object. Not quite sculpture, diorama, automata or painting, it draws on characteristics of all those things to create something new and unique. Measuring approx. 90 x 110 x 20 cm *After Midnight* reads as both a conventional painting and a small-scale tableau of domestic life.

The scene depicts a brightly lit living room cluttered with the trappings and trimmings of a well-used family space. A couple sit side by side on the couch, a play station waits...
expectantly in front of the telly, a cat snoozes on a chair and paintings and sculptures adorn the walls and mantelpiece. Open curtains behind the couple show a moonlit street and garden, while across the room french doors are left ajar onto a messy hallway in order to hear the kids. It is a familiar scene of domestic comfort, repeated in countless lounge rooms across the country. The serenity of the setting is marred only by the intrusive presence of the TV, its small size unable to restrain a skimpily clad sex siren bursting forth from its confines. A crimson tongue of flame flickers forth from the TV and is embellished with the words *red hot phone sex*. The tip of the flame reaches its zenith at the woman’s groin as she ecstatically brandishes a telephone and mouths the words ‘*Phone me! I will be very rude*’. Her antics have got the man on the couch leaning forward in excitement and he says ‘*God! look at this one!*’ with a lusty leer. His obviously long-suffering wife sits beside him with the words ‘*He will be up all night NOW*’ emanating from her mouth.

![FIG. 20. Glenn Morgan, *After Midnight* (detail)](image)

After spending some time examining the work I surreptitiously started to turn the handle. A kind of metallic thunk-thunking ensued. I stopped, looked around and made sure no irate gallery attendants were running my way before trying again. This time I persevered and the sex siren began to bounce and sway on the end of her springs; the work was suddenly alive. Even after I stopped turning, she continued to rock gently to and fro, her gyrations taking the idea of the intrusiveness of the box to the next level, an uninvited — although not necessarily unwelcome — home invasion. When you watch TV the volume always seems to get louder in ad breaks, and the bouncing swaying woman seemed to translate the volume from aural to visual.

In *After Midnight* Morgan has cleverly constructed the feeling of three-dimensional space, much deeper than the shallow space it physically inhabits. His use of imagined harsh lighting gives the objects and furnishings in the room clearly defined shadows...
as well as contributing to the impression of form and solidity. The fluoro-like lighting is interesting because it bathes the scene with a luminosity that is both cold and dispassionate, revealing Morgan’s quirks and foibles in an unflattering manner. The feeling of physical space in the work is further enhanced through the combination of painting, two-dimensional cut out objects and three-dimensional objects. The effect is like looking through a window onto another world, similar to watching the television and knowing that it only shows a minute portion of the real space outside the frame. After Midnight also alludes to conventions of the diorama by utilising ‘a specially shaped display alcove in which three-dimensional foreground objects and painted backdrop are arranged to create the sensation of a coherent, deep space’, but departs from the diorama by including elements of automata to activate the interior.

After Midnight encapsulates several key themes of Morgan’s practice. Conceptually it addresses notions of the domestic and family space, and judging by the amount of detail in the work I would guess it to be autobiographical. The work depicts a scene from the ongoing drama of his life, a typical moment transcribed into art anecdote. The physical trappings of home represent reality while the sexy ad infers a level of excitement and abandonment that Morgan perhaps harbours a secret desire for. It is a scene repeated the world over: reality and responsibility versus the freedom of imagination. Another recurrent theme is the invitation to the viewer to physically engage with the work: the work is only complete when the viewer turns the handle to animate the scene. Gallery director Michael Fox wrote that you could describe Morgan as a

3-D [artist] but you get the feeling that what [he is] aiming for is 4-D, a true interaction between the art object and viewer. Morgan has long held the view that his work should be enjoyed through touch and that galleries deny viewers this pleasure by placing a distance between them and the object.80

In After Midnight Morgan has invited interaction between the viewer and the artwork, and because of the domestic setting, in a sense he has also invited them into his own home.

Diorama Drama

Much of the action in Morgan’s works takes place in the confines of diorama style constructions, a format particularly suited to his chronicling. Although I have already established that Morgan’s artworks combine a number of media, from this point on for ease of reference I shall mostly refer to them as dioramas.

80 Michael Fox, ‘Morgan & Tate: An Introduction,’ p 2.
The early history of the diorama is enmeshed with that of panoramas and cycloramas, although these days we generally apply the term diorama to all of them equally. Toby Kamps notes that

The term 'diorama,' derived from the Greek *dia* (through) and *horama* (to see) was coined by the French stage designer and pioneering photographer L. J. M. Daguerre and patented by him in 1822 to describe a new, theatrical form of visual art.81

Originally, panoramas and dioramas were large constructions that immersed the viewer within a painted landscape that often depicted scenes of geographic importance, pivotal battle moments and newsworthy events. Early dioramas and their counterparts were intended to be educational and informative. In her book *Canvas Documentaries* Mimi Colligan observes 'Genres like the huge panorama and diorama, although new, owed their subject matter to the tiny peepshows ...'82 She also notes that they were the 'original "virtual reality"'.83 Despite their popularity, as technology developed dioramas lost their appeal, fading out completely before being reborn as museum dioramas in the twentieth century, in the form that we are more familiar with today. However, it could also be argued that the progression of technology has seen early dioramas (and panoramas) evolve into the television and cinemas of today. The earlier model of the peepshow also remains closely related to dollhouses and contemporary dioramas.

The term diorama is an appropriate one to use in relation to Glenn Morgan's work, because it also alludes to conventions of the dollhouse which in itself has a particular relevance to Morgan's house-like constructions. Curator Toby Kamps notes that 'the dollhouse is . . . the archetype of the diorama and also one of the earliest types of toys.'84 The analogy is especially apt for Morgan's art given his desire for the works to invite playful interaction. Kamps observes 'Houses within houses, pictures within pictures, dollhouses emblematize the intimate connection between states of mind and domestic spaces.'85

Dollhouses also have an interesting contemporary counterpart in the form of television. The physical dimensions of the objects are comparable and there are even similarities to be found within the nature of the interaction. While dollhouses elicit physical interaction as a means of 'entering' the space, television offers a more sedentary engagement.

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83 Mimi Colligan, *Canvas Documentaries*, p 1.
85 Ibid.
whereby the viewer 'enters' the world of the program. The extent to which they are engaged also contributes to the level of enjoyment a program generates: popularity ensures money for the production of ongoing episodes and further development of the story. Reality television takes the level of interaction even further, viewers choose the 'characters' they want to watch.

Likewise working within a diorama format means that most of Morgan's artworks are comparable to the size of a television, although the scale references chunky old free standing TV's rather than their 21st century slimmed-down counterparts. It is easy to translate the scenes in Morgan's work from sculpture/ diorama/ paintings into low budget TV shows. If we were watching Glenn Morgan's work on the box, it would be on late at night, well past the kids bedtime, in the same way that After Midnight is depicted. We would watch it for its gritty take on suburbia, for its unflattering warts-and-all portrayals of its characters, for its delving into the macho, misogynistic, rough-as-guts side of Australian culture.

Morgan's artworks share some of the same characteristics as television: we 'enter' the space through a voyeuristic engagement with the scene. Our level of interest in the artwork also dictates the amount of time we spend with the work, allowing details of the narrative to emerge and evolve.

MORGAN AND VOYEURISM

Somewhat surprisingly for an artist who makes work about the minutiae of everyday life, there are few overt references to romantic love in Glenn Morgan's work.86 The kind of love that he is more likely to depict is the fast lunchtime love of time strapped parents or the illicitly lusty. Home for Lunch is one such work, a dollhouse refuge for an amorous couple.

Measuring approximately 40 x 40 x 40 cm, Home for Lunch depicts a small one-room house built from plywood, timber, enamel paint, fabric and nails. Its exterior walls have been completely coated in slick and shiny yellow enamel paint, crosshatched black lines revealing it to be a ubiquitous 'blond brick' construction. The windows are adorned with lace curtains and the front door has been left invitingly open.

Access to this dollhouse is only through the door and windows, the roof is firmly closed and the walls stay fixed in place. A crank along the ridge-cap of the roof invites turning and when one does, while peeping in, it is apparent that a scene of carnal intimacy is taking place. A sun-burn pink, hair speckled man sits rigidly, pink penis rearing from his loins with the words 'yeh, yeh' captured in a speech bubble above his head, while

86 One exception is the piece I Love You 2004, which depicts a man and a woman standing naked and holding hands across the marital bed.
an equally pink fishnet clad woman bobs up and down fellating him, her bright red lips drawing attention to the act. The scene is unexpected and surprisingly shocking; it catches the viewer out in an act of unwitting, yet blatant voyeurism. In an unintentional double entendre Susan Stewart suggests that ‘Even the most basic function of the toy object – to be “played with” – is not often found in the world of the dollhouse.’

Home for Lunch partially contradicts her supposition in that the artist invites the viewer to ‘play with’ the work, but only on his terms. Participation is as voyeur, and one that evokes a kind of ‘pay-per-view’ sensibility. The title Home for Lunch, painted onto the roof, provides a context for the inside action and its rough humour.

A visually crude work, Home for Lunch depicts what would seem to be the antithesis of a romantic interlude. Looking at this work I wonder if the couple want to be caught out in their midday dalliance. The door has been left open, no blinds have been drawn and the lace of the curtains provides a minimal screen at best. Even if the viewer looks without touching, illicit details are exposed: a glance in the front door reveals the woman’s buttocks and clumsily painted genitalia, a peek in the window frames the ecstatic throes of the man. The visual crassness of the work is confronting, but also reveals unexpected and unprompted observations. Sure the couple in Home for Lunch look a bit grotesque, but lovers don’t look ugly to each other, even when their bodies are contorted into strange and seemingly impossible positions. What the absorbed focus of the couple achieves is to draw attention to our own voyeuristic actions. Peeping in the windows, looking in the front door, turning the handle to make the couple move, are all uncomfortable evidence of our willingness to look, and to participate.

87 Susan Stewart, On Longing, p 62.
Stewart notes that "The dollhouse...represents a particular form of interiority, an interiority which the subject experiences as its sanctuary (fantasy) and prison (the boundaries or limits of otherness, the inaccessibility of what cannot be lived experience)."88 Her observations suggest the dualistic nature of the dollhouse: both welcoming and repelling. Our imagination finds refuge, but our bodies are denied. In an artwork such as Home for Lunch, Morgan has managed to cheekily evade these limitations by inviting the viewer to effectively participate in a carnal encounter. Not only are our imaginations engaged, but the overt physicality of the act also draws attention to our own physical self and our physical contribution in making the couple perform.

In A Theory of Parody: The Teachings of Twentieth-Century Art Forms Linda Hutcheon defines parody as 'repetition with critical distance, which marks difference rather than similarity.'89 She suggests that parody rests across a range of levels, and that its meaning is constructed from both the original context and the new superimposed one.90 With this in mind, it could be argued that both dioramas and dollhouses are fundamentally parodic in their intent, which has interesting implications for how we view Glenn Morgan's work, given his use of both forms, as well as his unique hybrid versions.

Home for Lunch incorporates parody on a number of levels, the most obvious being the depiction and imposed repetition of a sexual act. It also parodies the dollhouse/diorama form as well as the memory of the anecdote upon which the work is based.

88 Susan Stewart, On Longing, p 65.
90 Ibid.
As seen in *Home for Lunch*, the size of Morgan's work necessitates a kind of visual economy of scale, which tends to transform his characters into actors playing a part, their compact stature rendering them slightly ridiculous and affecting the way we regard them. By reducing his characters to scaled-down versions of their real-life counterparts, Morgan designates them the role of imitators, forever caught in a parodic moment. He has effectively belittled them, both figuratively and metaphorically. The compact size of his characters means that they are diminished before our eyes, and our level of respect for them decreases in accordance with this.

Our attitude in this regard stems from a feeling of superiority: the viewer is physically bigger than the artwork and to some extent has physical control over it. The scale of the work also suggests that the viewer has the power to move and control the situation at will, even though our involvement is dictated on Morgan's own terms. The scale of *Home for Lunch* also functions as a means of creating a critical distance from the original subject, and combined with a sense of arrested (or stilled) time\(^91\) ensures that we are able to contemplate the work and its meanings free from 'real time' associations. Morgan, (whether intentionally or not) utilises parodic strategies in order to enrich and expand upon the original version of events in his recreation of them.

Stewart observes that 'Worlds of inversion, of contamination and crudeness, are controlled within the dollhouse by an absolute manipulation and control of the boundaries of time and space.'\(^92\) *Home for Lunch* presents an unintentionally literal interpretation of her words in that the viewer has the power to manipulate and control the scene at will and one in which the couple, despite their perpetual lust, will never achieve release.

*Just Looking: The Blokes Club & This is the Show*

The manner in which Morgan presents his work leaves the viewer no choice in becoming a voyeur. We are visually thrust straight into whatever scene or scenario is being enacted before we even really have a chance to decide if we want to be there or not.

The piece *The Blokes Club* is a case in point. A record turntable sized work, it features a semi-naked woman atop a rounded podium writhing against the pole at its centre while around the perimeter a circle of men look on. As soon as the viewer looks at the work they become the unwitting second-tier of the audience, privy to the woman and her thoughts as well as those of the men who surround her. The men wear matching office

\(^91\) 'In its tableaulike form, the miniature is a world of arrested time; its stillness emphasizes the activity that is outside its borders. And this effect is reciprocal, for once we attend to the miniature world, the outside world stops and is lost to us' Susan Stewart, *On Longing*, p 67.

uniforms of white shirts, dark ties, dark pants and brown shoes. The only variations are in the size of their beer guts and the length of their stubble.

As in other works of Morgan’s, faces are depicted frontally as well as in profile, which means that each character has four eyes. The multiplicity of eyes is especially apt for this work: leery lunchtime office workers standing like drones surrounding a queen bee, assiduously perving and ogling for the common good of profit. They are caricatures of the stereotypical sleaze, greedily taking in all the details at once. This is a work purely about sex and commerce, a point reinforced by the crucified heart sitting atop the pole, spiked all over with nails.
As a viewer our intention might not be to ogle, but we look nonetheless, searching for what enthrals the men to justify their behaviour. We can see the stripper’s concisely summarised thoughts in the word ‘Dickhead’ which could be a response to any—or all—of the men who say things like ‘turn the handle’, ‘I love lunchtime’, ‘She’s looking at me’ and ‘God she’s lovely’, but just as equally, her thoughts could be directed at us, as unintentional members of the audience.

Another work focussing on the sex industry is This is the Show, from 1995. Measuring 143 x 96 x 65 cm the piece is essentially composed of two parts: the ‘body’ of the diorama and the legs on which it stands. Its scale and bulk refers to the human body, its height inviting easy access for the viewer to look and touch. The work has a distinctive autonomy, its independence lending it the feel of a peepshow, a titillating erotic curio housed as a cabinet of curiosity.

This is the Show combines characteristics of the dollhouse and the diorama in equal measure. It is worth considering This is the Show in relation to them both because of the comparable modes of viewing that they require, entailing the viewer to imagine themselves within the confines of the space. Appropriately for this work Susan Stewart
suggests ‘...the dollhouse was originally (and perhaps still is) an adult amusement.’ Dioramas also had their beginnings as a form of popular entertainment in the street and fairground peepshows of the 1850s, and of course today, peepshows are a feature of the sex industry, which is yet another example of ‘adult amusements’.

_This is the Show_ is bright and lively, albeit in a somewhat seedy way. The front wall of the building is emblazoned with signs advertising ‘sex sinema’, ‘eroticam’ and ‘double action’. A spruiker standing in the doorway shouts ‘hot nude chicks’ while at the same time having an altercation with a woman resting on the bench who bails him up as a ‘filthy old shit’. Another woman strides around the corner of the building to question a man perving in through the window: ‘What are you up to?’ she cries. ‘Whats it to ya?’ he replies, not bothering to turn away from the glass. The timbre of the language is as colourful as the paint. Just in case the nature of the business wasn’t clear enough, a giant cut out woman reclines on the front awning, legs wide open, hand on groin, stars twinkling on her nipples, with the words ‘Come inside boys’ beguiling passers-by. The sign painted on the awning reads _This Is The Show_, an acrostic that forms the word _TITS_. The advertising doesn’t stop there, with the legs of the table whittled into the shapes of tall, elongated women, their bodies painted with a lace of lingerie. Morgan’s carved and decorated sex workers personify and parody the term ‘painted ladies’.

Susan Stewart and Ralph Rugoff both write about the necessity of looking at the dollhouse and the diorama from a frontal view, or angle. Stewart suggests that the dollhouse has a metonymic relationship with property and the self, noting that ‘...the dollhouse erases all but the frontal view; its appearance is the realization of the self as property, the body as container of objects, perpetual and incontaminable.’ However if we applied her theory to _This is the Show_ we would not be able to fully experience the work. We would be left looking at the front façade of the building. But if we take her idea of the dollhouse as a metonym for the body, it evokes an interesting relationship with the work considering its overt and salaciously carnal theme; especially with the way we ‘enter’ the space in order to view it.

Ralph Rugoff maintains that dioramas require the viewer to look at the object from a ‘frontal angle’ in order to comprehend the ‘illusionistic perspective’ afforded by the ‘specially shaped display alcove in which three-dimensional foreground objects and painted backdrop are arranged to create the sensation of a coherent, deep space’. Again, his proposition has only partial relevance to Morgan’s dioramas, given that Morgan

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93 Susan Stewart, _On Longing_, p 61.
94 Mimi Colligan, _Canvas Documentaries_, p 8.
95 Susan Stewart, _On Longing_, p 62.
paints on the ‘backs’ of his dioramas adding to the illusion of perspective, but it is interesting nonetheless because it illustrates just how far Morgan deviates from the strictures of the diorama while retaining a relationship to it. Morgan combines three-dimensional objects with two-dimensional space, and frequently houses them in a ‘display alcove’, but there is always something new to see and the convincing illusion of ‘deep space’ is always maintained.

If we look beyond Stewart and Rugoff’s assertions that the dollhouse/diorama requires looking at from a frontal perspective, and actually move around the work and peer inside, a wealth of information is revealed. Stewart observes that ‘The [doll] house is meant to be viewed from a distance, with attention focussed upon one scene and then another,’ which is certainly what happens when viewing This is the Show. When one does look inside, it is with the realisation that this is where the real action takes place. The interior is broken up into three rooms, the biggest room used for the ‘double action’ show. Two women up on stage fondle each other with one saying unconvincingly ‘This is fun’. The audience seems to

97 Susan Stewart, On Longing, p 63.
be having a better time of it – the air is littered with speech bubbles that say things like ‘Bend over luv’, ‘kiss her titties’, ‘pant pant tug tug’. The audience members caught in the throes of carnal revelry provide more of a show than the women up on stage. This piece goes one step further than *Mens Play Palace*: the viewer looks on as part of the audience, as a voyeur, but one that has the power to animate the work. The viewer decides if the carousing will continue and if one does decide to turn the handles that are positioned along the roof, wires joggle up and down and rows of men begin to wank, their pink tin hands curling encouragingly around their puny nail penises.

*Home for Lunch*, *The Blokes Club*, and *This Is The Show* are all works about voyeurism. The differing ways in which they are presented reinforces the role of the viewer as active voyeur; whether it be deliberately looking into a space (*Home for Lunch*, *This is the Show*) or accidentally being thrust straight into it (*Mens Play Palace*). The works also highlight the way in which Morgan transcends the limitations of both the dollhouse and the diorama and clearly illustrate how he is able to create artworks that utilise existing conventions of looking before taking them in new and unexpected directions. It is one of the reasons why it is so difficult to describe his work in the over simplified terms of ‘painting’ or ‘sculpture’, ‘diorama’ or ‘automata’.

**JOURNEY OF THE SENSES**

While I have already made mention of the dioramic and dollhouse qualities of Morgan’s work it is also worth noting their visual references to comic strips and cartoons, especially in context of the speech bubbles that frequently feature in the work. To some extent, the speech bubbles are used to convey the humour, or the punch line of the story. As Joan Kerr notes, cartoons rely on words to communicate their message and hence their humour. Aside from the disparity of their two-dimensional and three-dimensional forms, the most obvious and fundamental difference between cartoons and Morgan’s artwork is that in the former the text is static, and the latter it is essentially ‘performed’ by the characters. The words are ‘spoken’ and thus suggest a dialogue between the viewer and the artwork rather than encapsulating a summarised theme within a speech bubble or caption.

As well as giving voice to his characters, the speech bubbles in Morgan’s works also function as a decorative echoing of the general visual cacophony, the words adding to the level of ‘noise’ in the work. The combination of painted text, bright colours, repetition and congested compositions affects vision like sound. Through the decorative and

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99 ‘Glenn Morgan’s artworks are a scattering of colour and noise; he is the first artist I have encountered who can convey a sense of what an Australian sports crowd actually feels like.’ Martin Flanagan, ‘Never A Dull Moment In This Artwork Of Action,’ *The Age* 2 January 1996.
compositional function of text, Morgan's work continues to differentiate itself from cartoons and specifically Kerr's observation that 'The problem with the other entrenched expectation, that a cartoon must be funny, is that the caption rather than the drawing then defines the work'.

The performative aspect of the text, or 'speech' in Morgan's art also serves to draw our attention to the inherent sensory distance we experience when looking. Because we 'hear' the words of the characters there is an expectation that we might also be able to hear other sounds and smell the odours.

*The night our old dog 'Zuffy' pooed in the van on the way to Geelong* is a humorous recounting of a family anecdote that reveals aspects of the abject and grotesque while simultaneously elevating the subject to a higher place. The story is 'told' through speech bubbles, while alluding to the sense of smell and touch. The scene takes place after Zuffy has done the deed and depicts the Morgan family sharing the unpleasant task of cleaning up the mess. The night is dark and moonless; the black sky peppered with stars while the lights of the city twinkle on the horizon. The beaming yellow headlights from a passing...
car illuminate the family as they perform the necessary ablutions on Zuffy. Morgan's wife Olly kneels at the business end saying consolingly *poor old girl!* even though she must be copping the brunt of it. Morgan stands to the side, holding the torch and pouring a bottle of water while whingeing *I've got poo on me.* Their son appears to be the most affected, managing to let out the words *I feel sick!* while bent over mid-hurl. Even in the midst of his woebegone misery, appearances are maintained, ensuring that his pants hang low enough to reveal bum crack in a style replicated by countless teenage boys. Standing forlornly in the middle of the group, emanating apologetic guilt in the way that only dogs can, is Zuffy, her dejected speech bubble voicing a pitiful *sorry fellas!* When the viewer turns the handle of the crank the gross-out factor of the scene is reanimated; Olly continues to wipe the dog's bum, Morgan keeps pouring water and their son carries on with his technicolour yawns.

Poo jokes, or scatological humour, are a subject that goes beyond the boundaries of language and culture. Unlike many artists who have used the faecal as a source of fecund subject matter, Morgan's interest in it apparently stems from its presence in everyday life. Given that Morgan's art addresses themes of the everyday in all its mundanity and ignobility, it is hardly surprising that he uses its baser elements to illustrate what is often ludicrous to great comic effect. Surprisingly, Zuffy imparts an air of love and tenderness as evinced by the willingness of the Morgan family to tend to their pet, despite the mess and stench. The starry night sky, humble setting and configuration of the family translates to a scene evocative of religious tableaux. In a different context the three Morgans could almost be the three wise men tending to the baby Jesus. The simple straightforward theme of the work is a joke about dog poo, but it easily becomes a work about family, care and responsibility.

In addition to the sometimes dismal themes of family duty, *The night our old dog 'Zuffy' pooed in the van on the way to Geelong* also introduces the viewer to Morgan's interest in creating work about subjects that operate outside what we can experience visually. Artworks such as *Zuffy* draw our attention to the sounds and smells of the story.

*Death Stench: Dead Cow Truck 1 & 2*

*RON GEE'S DEAD COW TRUCK ph. 651268* (1)

Ron Gee must be a busy man; he's driving along with a truck full of dead cows. In his world it must be summer: the ever-present speech bubble reads *'Christ they stink!* but in the world of the viewer it could be any season, our noses cannot detect the stench of the decomposing corrupted flesh and rusty blood that Ron Gee can. *Dead Cow Truck* draws the reality of our sensory and olfactory distance to attention; no matter what we read and what we see we cannot enter the world that we are viewing. Our predicament is similar to Gulliver, who as Susan Stewart has noted, can only experience Lilliput through sight, and as such, his eyes are vulnerable. Stewart says 'All senses must be reduced to the
visual, a sense which in its transcendence remains ironically and tragically remote.101 Noticing the sensory distance from an artwork is unusual, because for the most part, we expect to only experience an artwork through sight.

Our transcendence from Ron Gee's world means that we are only able to watch from a distance. We look at the supine cows, scattered on the bed of the truck, privy to the realisations of one cow who thinks 'Shit, I must be dead!' and we observe helplessly, not able to intervene to assist the cow in the back of the truck who lies frozen but for the frenzied terror of the thought 'Hey mate, I'm still alive!' We are so distant that we can observe these things while simultaneously noticing the rough and ready construction of the cows, the irony of the use of what must be empty dog food tins to represent their rounded bloated bodies.

In our one chance to enter the world of Dead Cow Truck Morgan has offered the option of turning a crank, but when we do, it is with the further realisation that our involvement is futile – all that our actions serve to do is move Ron Gee's hands on the steering wheel, helping him drive the truck on its road to god knows where. Becoming really involved in this work is like being caught in a nightmare, we cannot stop what we see. Ron Gee looks friendly enough through the window of the truck, but with our dreamlike ability to see everywhere at once we register the bloodied axe lying on the floor of the cab and suddenly Ron Gee transforms into a hitchhiker's bad dream, rough as guts, eyes everywhere and arms just waiting to try and block our exit from the cab. On

the surface it would appear that Ron Gee is off to the abattoir, but if that's the case why are the cows already dead and why does he have a bloodied axe with him?

The possibility of menace in *Dead Cow Truck* becomes all the more apparent when we realise that this work has driven free of Morgan's more regular style of diorama, free from the constraints of the box. All of the elements that are normally anchored and painted into place are now on wheels and correspondingly mobile.

When Michael Fox flagged the idea of Morgan's artwork offering a true 4D interaction between the viewer and the work,\(^\text{102}\) who would have thought that it could have so effectively opened up the realm of horror? If you take just a passing glance at *Dead Cow Truck* its possibilities aren't all that obvious, just another benign scene on a rural road. But who could have predicted the fate that lay waiting for the Belanglo backpackers?

Perhaps this work has the outward appearance of cheerful good humour because of its bright colours and slapdash appearance, but imagine if we could hear the work. If, as Bachelard suggests, '...we follow the tale, we are invited to go beyond the auditory threshold, to hear with our imagination.'\(^\text{103}\) What would we think if instead of reading the speech bubbles of the cows, we could hear their pitiful lowing, the sound mingling with the steady rumble of the engine and the occasional grinding of the gears, the noises merging together to create a heartbreaking dirge, a soundtrack to death.

\(^{102}\) Michael Fox, 'Morgan & Tate: An Introduction,' p 2.

\(^{103}\) Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space* Translated from the French by Maria Jolas; with a new foreword by John R. Stilgoe (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994), p 166.
*Dead Cow Truck* becomes a literal and metaphorical vehicle for suffering, the abject dejection of the cows evoking an almost tangibly aural sense of loss. By drawing our attention to the sensory distance of this work, our imaginations inevitably turn to other instances of suffering, from the individual to the group. Imagine being able to see and read the invisible drifting clouds of speech bubbles that twist and roil in the air, ghostly word wreaths for all the damaged, dead and departed.

*Dead Cow Truck* returns us to Susan Stewart’s thoughts on the dollhouse: its inability to be known sensually, its inaccessibility to the ‘languages of the body’, while remaining cognitively gigantic.104 We can look and pry and move things about, but we cannot enter and be part of the work except in our imaginations. It alludes to conventions of the miniature, and as Stewart again notes: ‘Once the miniature world is self-enclosed, as in the case of the dollhouse, we can only stand outside, looking in, experiencing a type of tragic distance.’105

The impact of *Dead Cow Truck* is so devastatingly effective because it is unexpected. The humour of the construction and hopeless jocularity of the cows is as disarming as it is engaging. Glenn Morgan’s works can be so visually crass that it is almost easy to just write them off as the equivalent of visual one-liners or bad art, but their rough humour allows an entry point to the more complex issues that are being examined like grief, loss, love and suffering. *Dead Cow Truck* initially reads as a bit of a joke but for the faint yet indelible impression of disquiet and uncertainty that remains long after you’ve finished looking at it.

**Dead Cow Truck (2)**

*Sculptures and Paintings*, a 2006 exhibition of Morgan’s at Ray Hughes Gallery included *Dead Cow Truck* in a revamped reincarnation. The changes saw the truck painted a bright and shiny red, and tidy white signs on the side pronounced *Fat, Meat, Blood and Bone wanted*. THE DEAD COW TRUCK ph Ron on 03 55651268. The bloated corpses of the cows were tidied up too, gone were the anonymous.

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looking cans that made one think of empty dog food tins, now they were adorned with slick painted labels for Chum, Pal, Bush’s and IGA brand dog foods, almost as if we can only see the cows through Ron Gee’s eyes as the products they will become. The new and updated version of Dead Cow Truck was definitely more resolved, but at the same time I experienced a feeling of nostalgia for the old Dead Cow Truck and its pleasing range of ambiguities. However, reworking the piece allows for it to be reanimated in much the same way that is achieved by turning the crank. As Linda Hutcheon has noted ‘Parody is...repetition with critical distance, which marks difference rather than similarity.’ and the new version could be seen as a parody of a parody, continuing to mark the changes from real life into the world of observation.

THE FINAL CURTAIN

... the diorama and the dollhouse stage scenes of animation where history and even trauma can unfold within a script contained by the viewer’s private imagining.

An example of the dollhouse as a site of contamination, illness and death is Sanatorium «Berghof» Model nach dem Roman «Der Zaubergeb» von Thomas Mann. This dollhouse is a model of an upper class Swiss sanatorium, a recreation of the setting for the novel The Magic Mountain by Thomas Mann. The dollhouse features covered balconies from which invalids partake of the rejuvenating mountain air, a deck on which to promenade, a dining room, a sitting room and the concierge’s office. It also has an infirmary (which includes partial skeletons hanging in a lit display case), a bathroom and six bedrooms for the sufferers of tuberculosis. These fascinating rooms depict activities associated with

the illness; in one a maid cleans, in another a man reads and writes letters, in yet another the hallmarks of the illness are evident: a kidney dish filled with blood rests on the counterpane and a towel bearing the marks of muffled wet coughing hangs on the rack. More tellingly, an empty room is being readied for its next occupant.

Although this is a dollhouse devoted to illness, it exudes an upper class air of refinement and good taste; even the sickest patients recline in their wheelchairs in a dignified fashion. It recalls Stewart’s contention that “The dollhouse has two dominant motifs: wealth and nostalgia.”\textsuperscript{108} As a site of illness and death it is remarkably white and clean, and presumably germ free. In its exactitude and bourgeois determination to maintain a façade of dignity it supports Stewart’s argument that “the dollhouse cannot be known sensually [and] is inaccessible to the languages of the body.”\textsuperscript{109}

Somewhat ironically, the story on which the Sanatorium «Berghof» dollhouse is based is full of descriptions of the ravages of disease. On his first night in the sanatorium Hans Castorp, the main character of the book, hears the sound of consumptive coughing.

It was coughing, obviously, a man coughing; but coughing like no other Hans Castorp had ever heard, and compared with which any other had been a magnificent and healthy manifestation of life: a coughing that had no conviction and gave no relief, that did not even come out in paroxysms, but was just a feeble, dreadful welling up of the juices of organic dissolution.\textsuperscript{110}


\textsuperscript{109} Susan Stewart, \textit{On Longing}, p 63.

\textsuperscript{110} Thomas Mann, \textit{The Magic Mountain} Originally issued as \textit{Der Zauberberg} (New York: Knopf, 1927), p 12.
When Hans Castorp attempts to convey what he has heard he describes it thus: ‘... It is just as if one could look right into him when he coughs, and see what it looks like: all slime and mucous.’

The function of this dollhouse is almost to deny death, instead memorialising and valorising the well-mannered fight with which patients met the disease, but there are so many signifiers of illness throughout the building that it instead becomes a ghost house reverberating with the imagined wet sounds of coughing, of lungs drowning in fluid.

In contrast, Glenn Morgan’s painting *Cancer* from 1989 depicts an aggressive fight against the disease of cancer. The work shows a cross-section view of a simplified building that is like a dollhouse for cancer patients, but rendered even more inaccessible than a regular dollhouse because it is painted and there is no physical way for the viewer to gain entry to the space or manipulate the scene in any way.

Within the rudimentary house-shape are four rooms and an attic, the rooms all labelled according to their purpose: 1. *Chemotherapy*, 2. *Surgery*, 3. *Radiotherapy* and 4. *The Failures*. On the top floor the battle against cancer is being fought and on the bottom floor are the fatalities. In *Chemotherapy* a naked woman lies on a table, an intravenous drip hooked into her arm. In *Surgery* another woman lies splayed out, crucified by cancer, her innards poked and prodded at by the surgeon, her blood splashed across his gown, the operating table and the tiles beneath her. In *Surgery* another woman lies splayed out, crucified by cancer, her innards poked and prodded at by the surgeon, her blood splashed across his gown, the operating table and the tiles beneath her. She is twice the size of the doctor and the nurse, a physical translation of the metaphorical enormity of cancer and the radiating impact it has on the sufferer, their family and their friends. In *Radiotherapy* the patient, a man, appears to hang upside down because of the combined quirks of shallow perspective and flat paint. His head hangs off the edge of the table at one end, feet off the other while his body absorbs arrows of radiotherapy that shoot down at him from above.

None of the rooms have windows or doors or any objects of comfort. The bodies of all three patients lie stiff, almost as if they have already succumbed to the cold clench of rigor mortis, but their eyes are open and staring and their faces are set with an unhappy rictus of pain. It is almost as if the paint has fixed them in place, isolated and ill for all perpetuity, with no chance of relief. The cell-like brick walled hospital rooms look like gruesome torture chambers, the patients subject to intrusive interrogation.

Below them in the room titled *The Failures*, corpses repose in eternal slumber, shrouds pulled up over their heads as if to deny the light that beams mercilessly down from the ceiling. The wrought-iron bed frames are like bookends that hold together all the chapters, stories and anecdotes of the recently deceased. They can’t quite hold in everything though, even shrouds and death can’t hide the many pairs of feet dangling off

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111 Ibid.
the ends of the beds. After looking at the horror of the potentially life-saving procedures taking place on the floor above, one has to wonder if the ‘failures’ aren’t perhaps better off than those still trying to live.

In contrast to the scenes of pain and misery taking place inside the building, on the outside goofily smiling angels twirl through the air and appear to be turning cartwheels over the walls and roof. Even the multitudes of flower-adorned crosses bedecking the lawn have a slightly festive air. In order to see the angels Morgan has sliced through the metaphysical wall between life and death, enabling us to see through the divide in the same way we can see through the walls of the hospital. It presents ‘the tension between inner and outer spheres, of exteriority and interiority’.112 The whole scene is an extension

112 Susan Stewart, On Longing, p 61.
of the idea of the dollhouse, realms within realms within realms. Or, as Stewart puts it: ‘Occupying a space within an enclosed space, the dollhouse’s aptest analogy is the locket or the secret recesses of the heart: center within center, within, within, within.’

While not claiming that Glenn Morgan’s artworks could be described as miniatures, I think we can still describe them thus inasmuch as they present miniaturised versions of real life events. I make this point because I think Susan Stewart raises pertinent points about the nature of the miniature which can be applied to Glenn Morgan’s work.

It is noteworthy that in descriptions of both dioramas and the miniature recurring themes of death, loss and distance are mentioned. Stewart makes mention of a ‘tragic distance’, and notices how the observer is ‘trapped outside the possibility of a lived reality of the miniature.’ Toby Kamps draws attention to the ‘intrinsically morbid’ nature of dioramas and notes that ‘To arrest life, they must necessarily kill it (literally when taxidermy is involved).’ Ralph Rugoff makes the pertinent point that

Still others have chosen to focus on the idealized aspect of dioramas in order to revisit discredited utopian social scenarios, or to reconsider the modernist conception of art as neither symbol nor analogy, but as a social or philosophical model for conceiving and perceiving reality.

The artworks in which Morgan deals with issues surrounding death and illness are perhaps his most successful. His use of the hybrid dollhouse/ diorama adds to the depth of understanding about the subject, investing even the most banal details with an emotional poignancy.

**Loss and the Anti-Ethereal Angel: Never Ending Love!**

In the work *Never Ending Love!* Morgan has constructed an altar to his parents as homage to the lifetime of love that they shared. Housed within a shape that resembles a child’s drawing of house (square building with triangle roof) the work is a combination of 2D and 3D spaces. Although the shape itself is simple, it has been much ornamented and decorated in a manner evocative of both religious icons and folk art. The content of the piece is split into two main parts. In the upper triangle frame – the roof – is a 2D painting of Morgan’s parents on their wedding day; a snapshot of a much-revered moment which is stored in the metaphorical attic – the ‘mind’ and ‘memory’ of the house. Below is a shallow three-dimensional space, painted with the scene of a cemetery and its neighbouring suburbia.

113 Ibid.
The curved borders of the cemetery and its surrounding landscape accentuate the physical curve of the construction and also suggest the stage of a theatre. Centre stage and standing behind a white cross marked with the word Jean is a man whose grief is spelt out in speech bubbles: ‘I miss you so much’ and ‘I love you Jean’. Suspended in the sky above him, wings sprouting from her back and dressed all in white, is his angel. Her words ‘I love you Bill!!’ are trapped in a speech bubble, but it is doubtful he can hear her: his dejected stoop and the slight turn of his body show that his attention is focused on the humble headstone. Despite this, their bond is clearly visible. Wire rods emanate from Jean’s body, fixing her to the earth and forming a protective arc around her husband. Their love is literally as tough and strong as steel. The clear message here is that they are forever joined, despite the distance of death. Around them, life goes on. Shadows stretch out behind headstones, white clouds meander across the clear blue sky while the blank eyes of suburban houses vacantly gaze at the scene being enacted. Telegraph wires stretch between the buildings in a subtle reminder of the more earthly communication that remains. Looking at Never Ending Love! is like watching the closing moments of a great drama, at any moment the lights will dim and the curtains will fall, and Bill will still be sitting at his wife’s grave.
Toby Kamps notes how ‘... the embalmed quality of dioramas ... creates a kind of immortality. Their worlds and inhabitants, forever poised, may be dead, but they will also live beyond us.’

This quality can be clearly seen in _Never Ending Love!_ The raw grief of Bill and the certainty of Jean’s continuing presence is observed and re-created by Morgan, who has immortalised them with paint and tin and loving attention. Fittingly enough for a work about death, the piece has been constructed from what appear to be recycled materials so even the physical objects that comprise the work have had their own resurrection and been saved from the great scrap heap in the sky. Somewhat surprisingly, _Never Ending Love!_ becomes a work more about life and continuity rather than death and loss, where the physical nature and conceptual quality of the work have combined to create an enduring monument to Bill and Jean.

The thing I find interesting about _Never Ending Love!_ is that life sits so comfortably alongside death. Grief, tragedy, love and loss are juxtaposed against the edge of suburbia which introduces an unexpected air of bathos. When I think about what this work is saying it seems poignant and almost wrenchingly sad, but then I have another look and the details of what I see tell me something different.

Jean, for example, is a very solid looking angel. She is almost anti-ethereal – if she walked instead of floated she would clump along in her chunky white high heels, and I’ve certainly never thought about the body hair of angels before, but it’s obvious they don’t have razors in her part of heaven. Her flat tin arms appear to be riveted by the shoulders to her body, which makes me wonder if she swims through the air instead of flying and from there it doesn’t take much to imagine her arms flailing, churning through the fluffy white meringue clouds of heaven like beaters in a bowl of cake mix. She is a no-nonsense kind of angel, and all the more endearing because of it.

Jean in fact, seems more vibrant and alive than her husband, the very epitome of the expression ‘larger than life’, which is of course the natural order of things: we miss the ones we have lost rather than the ones who remain. The work is very much about Jean, even down to the realisation that it is her image as a young bride that has been painted onto old bottle-tops and used to both demarcate and decorate the borders between the two parts of the work; and again metaphorically marking the boundaries between life and death.

Susan Stewart has written about the ‘...capacity of the miniature to create an “other” time, a type of transcendent time which negates change and the flux of lived reality.’

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Never Ending Love! creates an 'other' time, one where it is possible for the living and the dead to physically exist in the same place and for it to be visible to anyone looking. It is Glenn Morgan’s equivalent of spirit photography. ‘Real’ time has stopped; there is nothing but the present and it is here that the power of Bill’s grief has been used to call Jean back. Maybe in ‘real’ time Bill has now moved on, and lives in a retirement home and plays bingo and is remarried to a cheerful ex-serviceman’s’ widow who makes good jam, but in art time, the ‘other’ time, he is left to keep grieving, to keep remembering and to remain enmeshed in the strong rays of his wife’s love.

Toby Kamps has observed how

Dioramas give the same gift of oversight, disembodied perspective, and change of scale we get from looking at vast terrains from towers and airplanes and peering at tiny and faraway objects through microscopes and telescopes. They supply the magical opportunity to step bodily out of the flow of life and time to consider crystalline moments.120

In an artwork like Never Ending Love! the diorama-style format provides an emotional ‘change of scale’ that enables us to look at the challenging subjects of love, loss and death with the distance necessary to see them clearly and relatively un-encumbered by other more pressing thoughts. Perhaps the ‘change of scale’ is even more applicable to the maker of such a work, whose close proximity to the subject would require a certain distance, or ‘disembodied perspective’ in order to make the piece.

This is a work that is as much about Glenn Morgan as it is about his parents. It speaks volumes about his need to keep the memory of his parents’ love fixed in place, forever remembered and enshrined for all to see. Ostensibly a work about two people, it must equally be a work about the person who made it, expressing unsaid aspects of his character along with the more overt qualities of the subject he is responding to. Stewart proposes that:

The miniature, linked to nostalgic versions of childhood and history, presents a diminutive, and thereby manipulatable, version of experience, a version which is domesticated and protected from contamination. It marks the pure body, the inorganic body of the machine and its repetition of a death that is thereby not a death.121

With Stewart’s quote in mind, it is possible to interpret Morgan’s reconstruction of the scene in Never Ending Love! as a perpetual memory of what his parents shared.

121 Susan Stewart, On Longing, p 69.
If we look at *Never Ending Love!* as if watching the closing scenes from a long-running drama, we can take the analogies further. Our main characters are positioned centre stage, and the stage itself is housed inside a small theatre. The gold hearts that adorn the edges of the work appear as bright twinkling lights, and from our viewing position, we have prime seats at the front of the theatre.

**CONCLUSION**

Although the dollhouse and diorama offer apt analogies for understanding the conceptual complexities of Glenn Morgan's artwork, they ultimately fail to fully describe the sensory element inherent in his work.

Glenn Morgan's artwork is not only a unique hybrid mix of art forms; it is also distinctive in that it offers the viewer a rare opportunity to engage with the work on both an imaginative and sensory level. By encouraging the audience to touch the work, the tactility of the sensory experience expands to include aural and olfactory awareness.

Encounters with Glenn Morgan's work offer new and unexpected insights into the world of everyday experience. The engrossing passion of lunchtime love, the gratuitous perving and ribald revelry of a strip show are subjects not openly talked about, but in Glenn Morgan's world they are proudly on show, and intimate details are displayed without hesitation. Morgan offers an empathetic understanding of a sometimes seedy and sordid world, while enticing the viewer to participate in an act of voyeuristic collusion that offers the chance to contemplate their own opinions and beliefs. Family life provides a fertile source of anecdotes that demonstrate both the ridiculously abject and the tender ministrations of a loving family, where care and compassion is masqueraded as scatological humour. Animals are afforded a voice, tortured cancer patients return as happy angels and the memory of a loved one lives on.

Glenn Morgan creates worlds within worlds, dioramas that immortalise stories and events from his own life and from popular culture. The scenes he depicts embody memories and emotions recast into paint, tin and wood; earthly materials that can nonetheless transcend the limit of a human life, transmogrified into perpetual memorials with the capability of replaying stories again and again.
4. CONCLUSION

This dissertation has used the work of Glenn Morgan and Noel McKenna as case studies to examine how humour provides a framework for exploring aspects of everyday Australian experience, and through this, popular conceptions of Australian national identity. Humour is an intrinsic element of our cultural identity. It shapes us, defines us and is used to help brand objects and ideas as being uniquely Australian. As this research has shown, Glenn Morgan and Noel McKenna's art makes use of the cultural significance of humour in order to question established ideas about Australian national identity. They are artists who understand the status quo, who borrow recognisable images and idioms from popular culture sources, uniting them with the disarming familiarity of humour to engage the viewer with the conceptual complexities of their work.

My case has focussed specifically on Noel McKenna's paintings of Australian Big Things, as well as the diorama / dollhouse works by Glenn Morgan. These bodies of work reflect the Australian predilection for siding with the underdog and our tendency to valorise suburban existence and its values. However, by using humour in a mildly mocking way, Morgan and McKenna challenge the complacency of these ideas. They take the supposition that humour is an integral part of Australian identity at face value, making a joke of our more cherished popular icons in ways that lift them out of their usual contexts, compelling us to re-evaluate our ideological and cultural assumptions.

Despite the fact that they both use humour and share an interest in popular culture, Noel McKenna and Glenn Morgan's work is fundamentally different in terms of what they ask of the viewer. McKenna paints landmarks that are regionally and locally specific, calling into doubt the assumptions we rely on to judge something as being uniquely Australian. McKenna's depictions of popular icons are conversant with the do-it-yourself aesthetic of Big Things, which he mimics by painting in a deliberately low-key style. McKenna's wit even destabilises our response to his own art. Reviews and articles about his work predominantly focus on its 'quirky', 'naïve' and 'whimsical' characteristics, lightweight words that don't allow for a more complex reading of his work to emerge. However, a close analysis of his methods lifts away a superficial veneer of 'niceness' to reveal much sharper, and at times quite cutting, observations.

On first impression Noel McKenna's paintings of oversized oddities appear playfully humorous, an impression strengthened by their clean, bright colours and bizarre incongruity with their surroundings. The humour in McKenna's work allows us to see the complexities of his paintings of Big Things. Their incongruity and relative detachment from their surroundings makes them stand out like the punchline of a
joke. His inversions of scale compel an alteration in the relationship between viewer and viewed. His gigantic subjects are rendered small, assigning the viewer to the role of giant. Pared back of extraneous details, McKenna’s Big Things prompt thoughtful contemplation.

Glenn Morgan’s work is unequivocal in its appearance and content. His bawdy take on the Australian suburban experience derives from popular culture and in particular makes use of television soap operas (of the up-late variety), reinforced through the analogies between dioramas and televisions. However, Morgan’s work engages the viewer more deeply by making work that clearly stems from his own personal experiences and observations. The viewer is drawn into the suggested narrative of the work, cued by the speech bubbles of the characters. When the viewer turns the handles and cranks to animate the work, they are inexorably drawn further into the story. The scale and profusion of observational details in the work function to draw the viewer closer, so that they must actively move around the work and peer inside in order to see it completely. Morgan combines the sensations of touch, sight and sound so that the viewer experiences the work as a perceptual experience.

Locating Morgan’s work in context of Susan Stewart’s writings on both the miniature and the dollhouse helps to provide a framework for understanding the complex space that the diorama presents, especially in regard to Stewart’s thoughts on the metonymic function of dollhouses. Morgan’s diorama / dollhouses are metonymic in that they encapsulate stories and memories of his own life, but they push the genre much further. By opening up the space of the diorama / dollhouse and confounding notions of the physical placement of the viewer, Morgan creates a new form that transcends the limitations and conventions of the dollhouse / diorama, in a manner that engages the viewer more completely through the senses of touch, sight, sound, while addressing concepts of identity.

Noel McKenna and Glenn Morgan’s art demonstrates the way in which their humorous use of scale strengthens the conceptual complexity of their work. By inverting the normal scale of things Morgan and McKenna endow the viewer with a god-like power to see things in entirety and in the case of Morgan, to move and control scenes at will. The consequences from this reversal in scale mean that the viewer metaphorically steps outside of time and is able to see everywhere at once. The act of looking becomes a revelatory experience, opening up possible interpretations of both the artwork and our own beliefs.

As this study has shown, both Morgan and McKenna are able to engage with the profound and mundane aspects of everyday life, and make us see objects and ideas that are familiar through their place in Australian popular culture afresh. In this dissertation I have argued that both artists use humour as a way of excavating deeper meanings from these familiar things in order to question perceptions of national identity and our own place in within popular culture.
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