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POST GRADUATE REPORT 1991
Sculpture Department
Canberra Institute of the Arts
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Sacred Cow to Canberra

For two years prior to commencing this Post Graduate course I worked in a small studio in Melbourne. The attitudes I held and the consequences they had for my work would serve well as an introduction to this report.

It took around four months to transform the old Carlton dairy into Sacred Cow. Six months had passed between the final pieces for the undergraduate show and the beginning of the new work. The first affect this long break had for my work was an inability to come to terms with working on the ground. Either I had lost the ability to make free standing sculpture or that as an issue was no longer relevant to my work. Be it blockage or break through, I decided to go back to some basic foundations to investigate this problem.

I started by focusing in on my subject matter which had been up until then the industrial landscape. Drawing had always managed to get me out of any fix, so that was the medium. However rather than going straight to the nearest demolition site I started drawing some of the neo-Gothic architecture that Melbourne is apparently famous for. The drawings were intentionally tight and they took on an attitude more akin to study rather than to personal expression. It was during these drawing sessions that I started to concentrate on individual architectonic components such as columns, arches, curves, steps etc. I developed these images further with in-studio drawing and then followed them with a series of hanging wall reliefs. These reliefs were made from wood, corrugated iron and paint. Images were drawn and carved into the wood. They were an attempt to combine drawing and object making together.

Looking back to Sacred Cow it appeared to have been time spent on a critical, though somewhat haphazard assessment of whether formally exciting sculpture could be derived from something other than purely formal concerns. That enquirey led me away from objects on the floor. Architectonic imagery had made its way into the subject matter where once objects with reference had been actively avoided.

Drawing 1988: 3000 x 1800
First sketches

Four months had passed since leaving Sacred Cow and in that time the desire to make free standing objects had returned. In order to re-establish myself with making I started a series of drawings using conte, bitumen, Damar varnish and white house paint on 200gsm Canson Dessin paper. As could be expected the architectural images started to resurface in these initial drawings however, I also started to play with the idea of laying consecutive images down on top of the initial washes and undermarks. This layering of images was the start of one of the key notes that would follow in subsequent works. Specifically it was the clashing of improvised non-objective images with considered referential images. With this approach I saw the possibility of resolving the formal/ non formal concerns mentioned earlier.

One referential image in particular surfaced in these early drawings that provided not only a direct link to architecture, but also worked well as a simple formal device. The house image had come from rapid sketches of factories and building sites in Melbourne. Severely simplifying this basic architectonic form relegated it to a linear construction of a square, triangle and a smaller square with a cross placed inside. This house image was to follow my work all the way through this post graduate year.

The first object I made was the simple result of an improvisation with wood and corrugated iron. This piece represented my first attempt to bring my ideas for object making back to the floor however its value was to be offered in negatives. As a result of working on the wall I realized that I had lost my sense of scale. Although this first piece was constructed on the floor it resembled the Sacred Cow work that had belonged to the wall. It appeared to have been merely placed on the floor and in this sense this piece had no place to go—it was visually groundless. These problems did however offer the first clear direction of how far I had to go in order to re-establish my desire to make successful free standing sculpture.
Captains Flat

By mid June most of the visual stimulus that I had brought from Melbourne had been exhausted. Searching for a local stimulus to develop past the sketching stage, I found the township of Captains Flat. Here was not quite the formal architecture that had informed the sacred Cow work but Captains Flat did offer a blend of architectonics and the visual chaos of a site in decay.

My focus was on the main poppet head. The poppet head was a large structure of wood and steel and it was rounded like an oil refinery tank. After a series of on-site drawings, photographs and a collection of materials in and around this site, I began working on 'Houseboat'. I consider Houseboat to be the first successful sculpture made during this Post Graduate year. It had led me to a scale with which I was confident and it also related well to the ground. It was the first free standing sculpture that I had made in two and a half years. More so than having reached the objective of re-establishing my work on the floor, Houseboat was successful for the problems it presented.

With the small scale work of the past, the various patinas on wood and/or corrugated iron had lent themselves well to a surface collage. Half way through the construction of Houseboat however it became apparent that this technique could not be realized. The increase in scale was leading the work to look more like a collection of material rather than a statement about form. Visually the form was getting lost in an overly complicated surface. This is the reason why I decided to paint Houseboat. I did not want to totally cover the surface rather I wanted to temper some of its confusion. Although I consider the use of paint partially resolved this problem, I was not totally happy with this as a working process. I felt there could be a more integral solution to the surface rather than just hiding it under artifice.

The results of studying Captains Flat were collated into a group exhibition that I organized in accordance with the desire stated in the work proposal. 'Lead Mine Ore Zoo' opened at Galerie Constantinople on the 24th of August 1990.
Blockage

One can expect a down period of work after an exhibition—even after a small show like Lead Mine Ore Zoo. For me however this post exhibition lull soon developed into a severe nose dive that lasted for around three months. Its consequences led me to re-assess my whole attitude to making sculpture.

From September to November I attempted to carry on with the improvisational approach to my sculpture that had led me from Sacred Cow to Houseboat. I started three large sculptures during that time and trashed them all. They were all intensely laboured pieces that gave no suggestion of direction or resolution. I travelled to Melbourne for the Sculpture Triennale and saw many works by most of the artists mentioned in the work proposal. Coming back to Canberra seemed only to compound the frustration that I felt about not being able to shift my work. As bad as it seemed this blockage developed into a breakthrough with three important realizations.

Firstly the total improvisational approach to my work had obviously had its day and it was now time to actually start composing in considered form. Secondly my materials and my approach to them needed reassessing, especially the nagging problem of surface. Finally, and probably most importantly, came the simple understanding that I had been working in a vacuum and Canberra was simply not offering the industrial stimulus that excited me. I decided to implement one of the survey trips mentioned in the work proposal.
In early November I travelled to Sydney to view Robert Klippel's exhibition of wooden sculpture. Roslyn Oxley, Legge and Blah galleries were all sharing this large exhibition however it was the work at Oxleys that I was primarily interested in. Oxley had concentrated on exhibiting the large scale, non-totemic constructions of wooden casting dyes. As stated in the work proposal, Klippel's work held a portion of my interest both for its constructed nature and for its use of found material. It was the use of found material that was becoming the bone of contention within my work and so this exhibition not only help to clarify some of the problems that I had been having, but it also stimulated the possibility of new direction.

The work in Klippel's show ranged from the formally inventive to what I considered to be the excessive and over worked. All were constructions of wooden casting dyes. Within a number of works the use of these wooden dyes started to nag at me. Intrinsically these dyes or elements were beautiful things and certainly Klippel's ability to temper or de-stress their functional history, whilst at the same time elevating their formal properties through deft composition remain to be Klippel's forte. However there were particular works in the show that fell short of this formal assessment, ultimately failing for the reason that the sculpture was subordinate to its parts and its parts were dependent on a seduction that was merely presented. By seduction I am referring to the elements baggage of history speaking louder than its formal properties...such as its former use and worn patina stressed by Klippel sanding back the surface. I found myself looking at a collection of elegant shapes that were talking eloquently about their own history and little more.

This criticism was not questioning the role of the ready-made nor that of the found object's role in say, Art Povera. Rather it operated as a critical comparison directed at the use of found material within my own work. The problem was that I had been relying too heavily on the seductiveness of my own materials rather than concentrating on their ability to describe form itself. The form was becoming dependent on the romance of the material it was made of - the romance of the material was corrupting the form. Secondly I considered that the sculptures were more an improvisation with material rather than with form itself. Improvisation was fine but I needed to address what I was making more than what the materials themselves could suggest. I was left with problem of how to develop considered form without abandoning the realm of improvisation and accident. Looking at the works at Klippel's show I thought of how challenging it would be to make my own found objects, relegate them to components and improvise with them towards sculpture.
Kembla

I arrived at Port Kembla two days after the assessment of the Klippel show. My intention was to study the site through large scale conte drawings and photography. Light rain fell throughout the five days of the trip, effectively cancelling the large scale drawings. As it turned out this offered a positive result. Firstly the rain that fell relegated the landscape into a series of monochromatic shifts of tone. These tonal shifts were enhanced by the smoke that constantly blanketed the area. It promoted an intense subtlety of form in the region.

The rain also forced me to draw from inside the car which meant that only small scale pen and ink work could be managed. Not being able to use conte prevented me from getting too involved with 'drawing'. The pen and ink work was tight and concentrated on the forms in front of me rather than on the ambiance that surrounded me. With these factors in mind I was able to focus on these compositions of forms that were to suggest the 'components' mentioned earlier. Here was the stimulus that would carry these components towards my new work in the studio. The chimney stacks, box cars and coal loaders were to become my found objects. It was simply a matter of fabricating them and composing with them towards sculpture.

Kembla had very much been the stimulus that I had been lacking during the three months of blockage and in this sense the emphasis placed on the work proposal had been of benefit rather than the distraction I had originally considered it to be.

On site sketch (actual size)
Kembla One

This was the first sculpture stemming from the Klippel/Kembla stimulus. My original intention was to place the 'house' on top of the smaller column, however this format was formally unsuccessful. The problem was one of scale. The house was too large a compositional element relating more to the ground. In the aerial position the house played too closely on irrelevant associations.

At one time it looked frighteningly close to a pigeon coop for one hell of a big bird. Placed on the ground however it read too closely to 'dog kennel'. Placing it upside down removed it from these rather embarrassing associations and having the smaller column on top removed it one step further. The house and the smaller column started to read as one element. Removed from its original stimulus it developed to a point closer to abstraction. It is the more industrial element when compared to the larger column. Being the first 'component sculpture' it stands quite well although it's compositional tension owes more to Rodin's leaning Balzac than to the industry of Port Kembla.

The use of corrugated iron became for me the contentious issue within this sculpture. For most of the year I had been trying to find a path around the obvious influence of Victor Merteens. House Boat did a reasonable job of incorporating this influence without resting too heavily upon it. Still I was not happy with the association. Cladding the two columns in such a 'Merteenesque' manner was a risk I took knowingly. As it turned out the incorporation of the wooden element amongst the architectonic columns removed the work sufficiently from the more figurative and evocative flourish of Merteen's work. I believed that my use of this material would best be realized by confronting this influence head on. Deciding to run so close to such a strong influence appeared to resolve the dilemma of the association. Merteen's technique was no longer relevant to my work. This was the last time I would use corrugated iron in such a manner.
Kembla Two

Within this sculpture I wanted to abstract the Port Kembla stimulus further and to tackle different formal issues to that of Kembla One. I considered this sculpture to be more formally adventurous as I was striving to distance the composition from the three element triangle of Kembla One. I also brought the ground in to play a more integral role within this piece. Its tendency to run across the ground (hence the secondary title) also stems from the panoramic view of some of the Port Kembla drawings. I chose not to place a tower within this composition although its presence is indicated by the cylindrical elements. These were actually segments taken from a pre-existing tower fabricated earlier. The vertical is now occupied by the elongated houses.

The carved relief on this sculpture originally came about as a necessity to enliven some of the quieter areas of its surface. Short of decoration however, I had used this technique on earlier works back at Sacred Cow and it was born from a desire to incorporate my drawing directly with sculpture. It is an extension of drawing. The images stem from the marks left on the shared walls of demolished houses - where stair cases would leave their 'imprint'. It is a secondary image associated directly with the primary form.

The cross that punctures one of these houses comes from the crossed window image of drawings mentioned earlier. It also owes much to the criss cross coal loaders that run all around Port Kembla. Here is one of the few areas in this sculpture where I decided to use corrugated iron.

The move away from using corrugated iron to primarily all wood is evidenced in Kembla Two. In influence this sculpture owes more to the work of Klippel than to Merteens. Unlike Klippel's work however the elements in this piece have been part of the entire mode of construction. They are a direct result of the drawings and studies brought back from the survey trip.
Kembla Three

Initially when I looked over Port Kembla it struck me as being one large, expansive, beautiful mess. It appeared to be a hodgepodge of form and tone with not any other reason for its existence apart from looking fantastic. This beauty was intensified when I realised that all this mess was actually ordered. Somehow it all functions - I mean, it has to. What I was looking at was a practical example of organized chaos which to me was a terribly pretty thing. Kembla Three is an attempt to capture that thing.

It is also the first piece where I consciously considered using the tonal shifts of the wood. The surface of the previous sculptures were still nagging at me and although I considered these sculptures to be successful in themselves I wanted to take this issue of surface a step further. Up until this point I had used these tonal shifts on a 'what came to hand' basis. Naturally, Rosalie Gascoigne came to mind even though sculpture in the round has not been an issue in Gascoigne's work for some time. The problem I had to tackle was how to apply this collage to a three dimensional surface - where the panorama is wrapped around the form and reveals itself gradually.

Two new elements appear in this sculpture. They are the half dodecagon and the wooden cable rollers. The half dodecagon is an odd inclusion in that its reference is not found at Kembla but rather in the freight containers that lie in the bellies of commercial airliners. They had always struck me as being good shapes and as a formal device it was necessary to the visual momentum of this piece. The cable rollers where my only contradiction to the desire to make my own found objects.
This sculpture saw a departure both formally and conceptually from the previous works in this series. The previous works had all depended to a greater or lesser degree on a compositional tension created by each component either touching or leaning upon each other. The influence of the British formal schools of the 60's is still very much in evidence within all of these works. With Kembla Four I wanted to make two separate elements that were capable of existing independently of each other. I also wanted them to relate from a distance rather than being physically joined. The challenging part was to have these two elements read as one composition.

Conceptually the 'observatory' is very much a response to the recent work of Tony Cragg - primarily his large wooden detergent bottles. Cragg's ability to present these familiar objects once removed from their commonness through a deft sense of scale, had always impressed me. At the time of writing the work proposal Cragg's work had started to influence my thinking about sculpture and Kembla Four was the first sculpture to utilize this influence.

The surface of Kembla Four finally resolved the problems mentioned earlier. It is the integral solution that I had been looking for, for most of this year. Utilizing the tonal shifts of the wood along with the gauge and width of each piece eliminated any reason to cover it in the manner of Kembla One. I realized that the surface of the various wooden shingles were offering their own potential to be sanded back or enhanced with a light wash of bitumen and shellac.
Notes on drawing

As stated in the work proposal, drawing will be presented as an integral part of the final folio of work. Apart from the series of sketches that were related directly to the thought process of the sculpture, I have pursued a series that are to be read as drawings unto themselves. These drawings have developed under the same stimulus as the sculpture however I have allowed them to develop as a separate discipline.

These drawings are improvisations using bitumen, acrylic paint conte and glaze mediums. It has been suggested that they are very close to painting although the rapid drying time of these mediums lends themselves to a faster plasticity than that of oil paint. The results therefore are far more spontaneous. For me, drawing has always offered this expressionistic response and I often used it to distance myself from the slower more labor intensive pursuit of sculpture.

The drawings are influenced by the works of John Firth-Smith and to a lesser degree by Cy Twomble. The darker more atmospheric images stem from an appreciation of Goya and Rembrandt's ability to manipulate light.
Notes on monoprinting

In the final weeks of this Post Graduate year I was introduced to the technique of monoprinting and produced a series of fifteen prints. They are all dealing with memories of Port Kembla at night.

This medium allowed me to explore light and in particular its behaviour in such an environment as Port Kembla.

I consider the smaller prints to be the more successful as the area to be 'lit' was far more critical. It was a matter of punctuating these small dark environments with minimal information in order to express the maximum impact of the subject.
Conclusion

When I entered this year I considered that the time ahead of me would test my pre-conceptions about my sculpture and about myself. I stated in the original work proposal that I was "concerned with augmenting the attitudes and work practices developed in previous years." That most of those 'attitudes and work practices' have totally changed for the better has made this year invaluable. For those who assisted me in achieving these changes I offer my sincerest thanks.

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- Pamela for the late hours and such

and finally Mascha Moje for her technical assistance, stress management and new friends.
Work Proposal

My basic goal this year is one that is concerned with augmenting of attitudes and work practices that I have developed in previous years. I see this year as an intense study program. I wish to achieve at least double the output of a 'normal' studio year. At this point I should stress that this goal is far from academic. In essence it's resolution will be visual. It will elude any attempt to be defined by verbage. I can however offer some basic ideas that may help clarify my work proposal.

The main stimulus for my work comes from the environment around me. The landscape, specifically urban industrial landscape, is the closest thing that I could call 'subject matter'. The state of collapsed architecture, the accidents of demolition, the random chaos of old factories, the unplanned order and disorder of useful and useless industry, waste, rust and decay all trigger a visual response that excites me. This is not a romance with age nor is it a concern for nostalgia. Time chaos and accident have all left junk such as corrugated iron, wood, tin and industrial hardware with a patina. I choose this material as it is now and pay little attention to its literal history. This is where my work differs from that of say Rosalie Gascoigne. (Re: Arnotts parrotts, enamelled jugs or boxes of nostalgia) My work will be tangible evidence of my response to such environments. I propose to make several survey trips during this year to the immediate industrial areas of the A.C.T. and N.S.W. These trips will cover Port Kembla and Newcastle.

On these survey trips I propose to document my responses through a number of media. These will include on site drawings and still photography. These sketches and images will vary from on site sketches (to be utilized in the studio) to fully worked articles of on site response. Such environments also contain the hardware that my sculpture is made of. These include corrugated iron, form board and scrap tin.

My method for making these sculptures will be construction. Construction is directly linked to the subject matter which in turn is directly linked to the subject matter. These sculptures will vary from wall pieces to floor pieces. Drawing will be submitted with equal consideration. I see the two disciplines as being necessary to each other.

The visual attraction to the landscape is not the sole stimulus that I bring to my work. I have actively courted influences from other artists work with whom I have felt an empathy. These artists include John Walker, John Firth-Smith, John Cattapan, Phil Hunter, Peter Booth, Robert Boynes, Fred Cress and Louise Herman. These painters are all involved, to a more or less degree, with the landscape. They are also concerned with the language of their own medium. The sculpture of Victor Merteens, Bruce Armstrong, Micheal Snape, Peter Randall, David Wilson and Robert Kippel influence the constructive nature of my work. They too are artists concerned with the language of their own medium. These are all Australian artists and are mentioned with regards to following their progress this year at their respective exhibitions. International influences include Cy Twombles, Asleim Kiefer, Joseph Beuys and Tony Cragg.

* During this year I intend to organize a series of slide talks and critiques which will enable myself and other students to interact and develop working practices. * I propose to hold a group exhibition with two other students to be held in either August or September. * I am currently submitting proposals for the Floriade Sculpture project.