

MAKING IT NEW

FOCUS ON CONTEMPORARY
AUSTRALIAN ART

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Making it New: Focus on contemporary Australian art

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Cover image:
Neil Taylor
Old Australia 2003
found metal objects
9.5 x 31 x 8 cm

Endpapers:
Neil Taylor's studio (detail) 2009

Images courtesy the artist and Niagara Galleries, Melbourne © the artist
Photography: Mark Ashkanasy

RUTH WALLER

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Ruth Waller's distinctive visual vocabulary is influenced by iconographies from the history of painting: pictorial design and pattern within Romanesque frescoes; compositional dynamics within late-mediaeval Northern European Christian altarpieces; motifs used by early-Renaissance masters such as Giotto, Simone Martini, Giovanni Pisano, Piero Della Francesca and Fra Angelico, and by Spanish Gothic and early Flemish painters. Conversely, her subject matter comes from the contemporary world: items from the everyday, for example, rubbish skips, gloves and beds; interior spaces such as kitchens, hospital and hotel rooms; references to the natural world such as animal paws, the Australian landscape, night skies, tree stumps and micro-organisms; architectural features; and finally hybrid forms of still-life, narrative figuration and abstraction.

Ruth Waller's first exhibition, *Remote Control* at Watters Gallery, Sydney, in 1981, contained a series of collages and prints that were made from dismantled and re-assembled media images captioned with slogans and passages of political commentary. These montages deal with issues of feminism, political economy and ecology. Waller here is investigating the hegemony of consumer culture and the collapse of the Australian suburban dream.

In the mid-1980s, Waller began to draw and paint, and the idiosyncratic trajectory that follows is highly measured and emotional. We experience her painting as an intersection of her personal life, her politics and her engagement with art history. Waller's political agenda and commitment to humanitarian issues such as the dispossession of Indigenous Australians is often seen during this period, which culminated with the series of paintings *Pawscapes* (1989) that comment on issues surrounding land exploitation. The paws of endangered species are painted to resemble maps of land that has been destroyed—Waller is questioning the role of mankind in the extinction of species and ecological disaster.

Important works were produced in the 1990s, such as *Deep Time in a Brand New Kitchen* (1993), *The Hospital Paintings* (1994), and *Another room, Another bed* (1995). On one level exploring the idea of the domestic interior, these works also show Waller's ongoing interest in space—transitory, pictorial, hypothetical and emotional. In 2000, whilst living in Barcelona, Waller became fascinated by rubbish skips that contained remnants of old buildings. Intrigued by the appearance of these 'dustbins of history', Waller began to photograph and paint them. On returning home to Australia, she made small scale replicas out of recycled and reconfigured cardboard packaging.¹ Waller sought to imbue these abstract 'tableaux' with the emotional and narrative qualities associated with the *Lamentation* and *Deposition* scenes of the Northern Renaissance masters Petrus Christus and Rogier van de Weyden. The relationship between materials and emotional experience is paramount: Waller speaks of 'the paradox of the insistent material banality of the

recycled packaging and a sense of the frail humanity of these lives unravelling in the face of death'.²

A direct outcome of this engagement with the sculptural form is the series of works based around the figure Dulle Griet, derived from the painting *Dulle Griet* (1562), by Pieter Bruegel the Elder, which is housed in the Museum Mayer van den Bergh, Antwerp, Belgium. In this painting, Dulle Griet, or 'Mad Meg', is the central figure fleeing a scene of apocalypse. Waller, having made previous sketches of this figure, consulted origami and craft books and built her from reconfigured cardboard packaging painted over with white enamel. There are three sculptural versions made by Waller of Dulle Griet which became the models for a series of painted portraits. Waller's Griet is a precariously balanced, robotic architectural structure, personifying 'First World greed, consumerist glut, environmental plunder and the flight of displaced peoples'.³

The most recent work by Waller, *Untitled diptych* (2009), explores the implications of juxtaposing two forms of illusionistic painting: *trompe l'oeil* and Op Art. In 2008, following the death of her father, Waller exhibited a series of paintings of blank sheets of crumpled paper, which she referred to as 'pictures of nothing'.⁴ In this latest work she complicates the 'tricking of the eye', destabilising our perception. Significantly, her approach to these genres of illusionism is not purely optical; the painting's surface is modulated and layered, as the product of a physical, material process.

Such a diversity of subject matter, married with a painterly virtuosity and a desire to understand the world in which we live, ensures that Waller's paintings are not just about art, but about life and its complexities. As she condenses ideas into poetic symbols, metaphors and pictorial devices, Ruth Waller oscillates between experiential and personal reflection, and political and critical engagement with the world. Above all, Waller balances ideas with images and paint, and thus finds a meaningful place for painting in contemporary culture.

1. Waller, Ruth, 'Dulle Griet and global glut', seminar paper, *Art and excess* conference, ANU RSH, 2005.

2. *Ibid.*

3. *Ibid.*

4. Ruth Waller in conversation with Isabel Hesketh, 9 May 2009.