

“Maintain the buzz” — Lenin

Artists:

Ian North—*Haven 2001*—Greenaway Gallery, July 31st—August 30th; *Heartland*—various artists—AGSA, June 21st—September 8th; Lorry Humphreys—in *Blender*—various artists—Australian Experimental Art Foundation, July 26th—August 17th; Paul Sloan in *On Men*—various artists—Felt Gallery, September 5th—21st; Sandra Uray-Kennett—*A knight’s tour through a rent in the wall*—Project Space, CACSA, April 26th —May 26th

by Ken Bolton

How provoking?

Ian North’s recent landscape photographs at Greenaway’s came as something of a surprise—to me—though that they should says more about me than anything else. Not normally drawn to photography my expectations are lowered—and it is true I don’t look at the good stuff *enough*. (I am not very sure that the frameworks I am proposing are exactly accurate. As history my account undoubtedly conflates or compresses far too much. As well there is art that might be said to employ photography without being very much *about* photography—Thomas Demand, say—and not totally ‘conceptual’ either.)

North’s work in *Heartland* was one of the genuine strengths of that show: *Felicia: South Australia 1973—1978*. These were his photos of suburban Adelaide from about three decades ago, black-and-white, bleak, yet suggesting both a kind of absence and the faint possibility some hidden but answering positive, as if perhaps an absence so strong that it must (might?) elicit an epiphany, draw down some spiritual insight or plentitude, just on the basis of need: the curious skies above the roofs, lit as though they might generate an eerie hum; humility and disappointment calling down some equal and opposite response—as though in a Platonic world these needs would be answered by a requisite ‘grace’ supplied by

a corresponding sphere. They showed a dispiritingly flawed and fallen everyday; the signs of its aspirations to be something better (attempts at design, ornamentation, privacy, gardens, landscaping etc); and this weird intimation that—since this was a world we knew and it should look less strange—life *might be carried on within*, not entirely blighted, suburban but maybe human as well, there might even be ‘community values’. (Most suburban domestic architecture must, at best, be forgiven: it never looks inspiring and usually proposes a fortress-like denial of the world outside—even the houses in design magazines for the most part, when not photographed so as to disguise the fact, saying *Nyet*, or *leave me alone*.) And the Felicia sequence compassed more than just the suburban: there were pictures taken at The Fleurieu and Yorke peninsulas as well.

The work at Greenaway Gallery—*Haven 2001*—was more recent, in rich (chiefly green) colour, and was landscape minus the human designs played upon it. Well, shaped, tidied, ‘landscaped’, to some degree, by human agency—but not too much evidence of contemporary human dwelling.

Part of North’s photographic DNA must be early Ed Ruscha, an enthusiasm North would have picked up in the 70s. It is close to the surface—its program is—in the *Felicia* group. Not that he is attempting *26 Gasoline Stations* exactly—but many of Ruscha’s shibboleths would have been operative in these works and much of the positive procedural program in Ruscha would have seemed entertaining, daring, persuasive and witty and droll to the young Ian North. Along with other desiderata all his own. North was well-informed from get-go, probably. If not, then very soon after: he was one among a number of fellow New Zealand photographers (Peter Black springs to mind: deliberately low-fi, casual, demotic documentation of streets, people etc), and in Australia he became a senior curator at State and National galleries—and he was involved in art education. A long public career in which, while making much art, he forebore to exhibit on grounds, largely, of conflict of interest.

Thirty years—a great deal of practice, experience and thought—have given Ian North both more freedom, and more to deal with. It occurred to me that these landscapes could be assimilable to the kinds of photography shown regularly in the early 80s, at Adelaide’s Developed Image Gallery: landscapes of middle- to long-distance, with focus on, say, an arc of interesting hill covered in interlacing and visually interesting dieback (silver, twisted wood and branches, against earth and grass and fallen bark... very high horizon) spring to mind. But the current works differ in a way that reflects the intervening years’ changing fashions and sensibilities, and attitudes. To some degree it might be a reconciliation—an assimilation, if it is one, that takes on that earlier mode and most of its values and translates them through a grid of the new desiderata.

The chief markers of this would be composition and subject matter.

Depth-of-field is great, here as it was back then. Suddenly it was beside the point and jettisoned in the intervening 80s and early 90s. (With highly manipulated photography the detail seems irrelevant, since we suspect it of being manufactured rather than honestly captured by the lens. One's attitude becomes a defensive incuriosity: why bother examining the confected reality? 'Honestly' is admittedly a weird word to use: what kind of judgement do we think we make? How do we gauge it? Does it matter: why not judge the image on its own merits?)

Fiona Hall was one of the first signaling the Ruscha-instigated departure from the 70s/80s mode, the first I saw locally at any rate. Not that at that stage I had my eyes open really: I had just begun trying to write criticism. Hall was initially known solely as a photographer and her work of that time had that reduced or muffled or suppressed drama, the avoidance of the too picturesque, the occasional fixation on the inane detail (*al la* Robert Venturi and *Learning From Las Vegas*, say). So, the same family as North's *Heartland* work. Hall, though, didn't channel the coolly serial manner of Ruscha's photography.

The Developed Image's kind of photography was wiped out, replaced by work responding to Postmodernism's wish to fulfill programs of Baudrillard and Barthes: the rendering visible of subtexts, the presentation and framing of self-caricaturing, self-invalidating propositions made by images sampled as being part of a larger and always ongoing Master Discourse. This was Foucault's reading of culture, of cultural hegemony, as discursive. The images, then, tended to be quoted, or to simulate a (discursive) mode. After a time such work was done, complete, or seen to be too easy, the righteousness less compelling than irritating. In any case we were the converted and didn't need the preaching. In the same manner the means and investments of the earlier, previous photography were analysed, pilloried, ironized, rendered unhip and passé, written off as Romantically complicit. *Vale*, Developed Image.

Ian North's *Haven 2001* at first recalls that 70s program (as it derived from Ansell Adams et al and a long tradition of mid century photography). North doesn't seem to wish to disavow his scenes' natural beauty—and we all know 'Beauty' is something of a problem for some streams of the modern and the contemporary and is reliably anathema to the avant-garde.

Recall Lucy Lippard's formulation "the cult of the direct and the difficult", the modern's frequent focus on the urban and the new, the (implied) viewing subject being the (bourgeois, or maybe blank) individual rather than, in a notionally Pietist Germany, defined by membership—by religion, social standing, guild, gender—and receptive to a world, a cosmology, that was hierarchical, ordered.

With *Haven 2001* the conventionalized forms by which beauty is offered are—by design—easily recognized and too quickly exhausted, leading to the viewer’s pondering the ongoing pull of the photos, their seeming inexhaustibility. This is their huge payout and it inheres in vast amounts of visual data, choreographed, ordered, by light. The recession into space (once we ignore the quick perspectival trip that is conventionally offered) seems one of infinite gradations of green, tufted grass-blades, each lined by the shadow it throws, patterns on the grass that are furrows, old paths, drainage depressions or other sorts of unevenness in the land, shadow cast by cloud, and the lines of fence posts.

Haven 2001 at first resembles the well made ‘Developed Image’ photos of around 1980. But the compositions are only mutedly pictorialist, merely efficient and economical in their utilizing of picturesque composition. North employs these as a ready scaffold, but with some irony.

So, while some photos do have a path for the eye—to a touchingly telling spot, a small hut, a framed scene within the larger scene; while they do mass trees or cloud to one side and balance them against other formations dramatically enough, do lead the eye through ordered stages into the recession the pictures report—they do so in almost perfunctory manner. Well, no, not quite perfunctory—but in a way that does not proclaim originality, or too much drama, almost no surprise. Irony, as I’ve said? Or just a gentle fondness? The scenery is conventionally beautiful. That is, ‘by convention’ it would be agreed to be. But in this enterprise North seems purposefully to ‘run dead’, to undersell. The real surprises and delights, the real orchestration within these pictures, that North does offer, happens *within* those forms. It is a matter of detail, of air, atmosphere, light, and a myriad repetitions of the physical, that are held within the more recognizable organizing conventions. Visuality for a slower looking.

A breathtaking apostasy? That’s a bit strong, but North does acknowledge that the *Haven* pictures represent something of a provocation. He thought they did, or might, or would? His thought at the time, or since? “Provocation” is his term.

The kind of beauty delivered seemed to me classically ‘German’—not Bernd and Hilla Becher, or Werner Manz, not Thomas Struth—but Caspar David Friedrich, Idealism and *gemutlichkeit*, Biedermeier (the ‘small’ virtues of tamedness, the cosy, the well-mannered) and Rilke’s sensed ‘immanence’. Ideal Truths and ideal order? Hegel? But no designs on History or World Destiny. World Spirit, then? Just, a little holy, a little spiritual. I know: *Easy stomach*—to quote Daffy Duck, Lucy Lippard, the other futurists. (This response will likely have been a factor North bore in mind: part of the provocation he saw the pictures as bearing.)

The *Haven* photographs are in many ways direct opposites of the *Felicia* works: *Haven 2001* shows the quotidian quickened to a glowing beauty and calm that

are breathtaking: many shades of green taking the light differently, an infinitely knowable opening up of space. The horizon line is at about midpoint in these pictures: the format is boxy, slightly wider than tall in proportion. (The *Felicia* pictures I remember as more horizontal: but this might have been the lower horizon line or sky-line introducing, thereby, a low horizontal accent to the pictures.) In *Haven* the sky does not threaten, oppress or withhold (as it did in *Felicia*): sky and earth are weighted approximately as equal, and as unified where *Felicia* had them opposed. In *Haven 2001* sky and earth echo each other, are equally readable (indicators of weather, sweep, and a sense of moisture, movement). Occasionally this echoing or doubling is made very direct via reflection in water. *Haven 4* and *Haven 8* are two instances—but in both these cases the stunning reciprocity subsides, bows out, to allow endless verification and comparison; *Haven 1* is interesting partly for what the darkness of the doubled mass at left refuses to give up while it looms against the scene it thereby thrusts upon us. But it is the even less demonstrative or rhetorically armed numbers 3, 5, 10, and 2 that seem most attractive. *Haven 7* is coyly amusing, compositionally. But it gives these very same satisfactions even as we smile. The pictures seem all to be taken late in the day: the light is gentle, declining, and it picks out detail, throws things into relief as it rakes across the sight-line of photographer and viewer. I think *Heartland's Felicia* pictures featured a different light, more George Herriman, harsh. There was a sense of unresolved questions, of mystery, foreclosure with the *Felicia* sequence, rather than *Haven 2001's* opening out.

With so much to see the viewer can feel that the *Haven* pictures are each a gift, a device that makes the eye delight in what it can descry. All this is consonant with the scenes, as is the impression of remarkable air. I was reminded that green was thought the most relaxing, healing colour for the eye: the day-labouring poet John Shaw Neilson was recommended it and felt it to be true. Modernism's centering upon the medium's strength, its defining strength or province—with photography it was the revelation of appearance, detail, texture (seamless and 'analogue')—this is all here again, as it was before Postmodernism's insistence on the always-already ideological, loaded, and mediated—and which chased out those particular charms, or at least their credit-earning status.

North says he was consciously inhabiting, revisiting the paradigms set by older, pictorialist photographic conventions (he cites John B. Eaton)—and that he was also quite conscious of his residency (at Bundanon in NSW's Shoalhaven district where he took these photographs) as at an idyllic remove from the particulars of the interesting times we were then living through: Twin Towers, for instance, and the subsequent new round of Middle Eastern conflict that was instigated. North may have felt the whole situation was something of a gift in itself, gratuitous, unearned even, and interestingly problematic given the wider context—problematic both for him and us. Problematic or salutary. Beauty in the face of

terror, daisies offered to tanks? Or just something to bear in mind, factor in, perhaps.

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Does *Haven* deliver an expanded version of one's self-consciousness: we divine that we might be part of a cosmic, collective subject: the world as Absolute Spirit or Mind? *Whoa—get your hat!* (One could meet God face to face practically. Is *that* German Idealism?) What kind of Young Hegelian is Ian North in these pictures? A free-booting atheist, or a pietistic pantheistic swooner? Or is he simply amused that the photos can read that way, after the dry, affectless, non-committal modes of the preceding decade or two?

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Would *Haven 2001* have fit at the old Developed Image? The photos might have seemed unduly quiet, undemonstrative, not sufficiently bold. As well, most of that work used to be black-and-white. The leap forward that the *Haven 2001* pictures represent lies here though. It is the restraint which enables these pictures to knock you out without needing to grab you by the shirt front and demand attention and loud hosannahs of assent. (Something that had always made those pictures tiring and resistible.) Around that point photography moved fully into the ordinary gallery scene: it had become art like other art—just as it was about to surrender to a regimen of reporting on the popular photographic media and its sins—and consequently to lose its particular purchase as a medium. Well, that case could be made. It probably has.

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Here's a précis of my argument. —

Three modes, manners or styles (with their different values and attitudes)— 1, 60s/70s late modernist landscape photography; 2, the 80s/90s postmodern, second-order ('linguistic turn') photography; 3, a return to the intensely visual—while somehow mindful of, or unwilling to jettison, the prescriptions and proscriptions of style two.

OR. Here we have one formal paradigm (*mode 3*, as above) gaining admission for the other, or standing aside to reveal the other (*mode 1*): the one's plenitude as alibi for the meaning of the other (the reservations of mode two being bracketed out)?

Or. 'Here's the thing', as they say: Ian North is showing two bodies of work that represent—or at the very least 'reveal'—two different modes and cause me to

think about one prior still. The earlier work here represents that which, in the 80s, replaced the 'dominant paradigm' of the 70s and earlier and which has, itself, faded from the front lines of exhibition. North's newer group has some of the irony, the simulation that more recent photography has dealt in, but manages to recoup a great deal of what the previous style had been keen to ironise into shameful oblivion. Is this nostalgic? One might wonder how North feels about these succeeding modes. There is little point regretting a change unless you are advocating a return of some sort. The current work is finessing one set of virtues within the co-ordinates of another mode. My guess is that this is not so much the proposal of a 'middle way' as it is the recipe for a one-off exercise: the manufacture of a beautiful conundrum.

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"... who and where we are"

Heartland was subtitled "contemporary art from South Australia" which approximately sums up its thesis—though "from and about South Australia" might have been more accurate, if a little parochial in sound. A survey, then, of South Australian artists who somehow address South Australia, or address something more local or particular within South Australia. The work mostly looks at a nominally South Australian environment, or at aspects of belonging here, how and where we live. This ruled out artists working on more general or purely formal themes. Anyway, I've no argument with a survey, and not much argument with the title as a catchy attractor, even a catchily misleading attractor. (Most South Australians don't live in rural environments, but there was a lot of countryside in the exhibition. Because the punters like landscapes, do you think? Anyway, major institutions can't afford too often to be lead institutions and *Heartland* has its heart set on being popular.) Now that I think back on it, maybe Amy Joy Watson could be considered as largely 'formal'. One of the show's virtues derived from the curators' decision to show fewer artists but show more of their work. Each participant was well-served in this respect.

One of the strongest impressions the show gave was of intense colour, and here the **Tjala** artists from Amata provided the biggest serve. Their work was bright and fabulously uplifting, and wonderfully sure, as if—whatever the pace of composition, quick or measured—they were made without pause, without second thoughts or unforeseen revision. One knows (I think) that the work will be topographic or to do with myth and legend: so in either case the artists are working with elements of geography or narrative that can be stated, adumbrated, offered—not interrogated, or

striven towards. The work communicates great certainty and boldness.

Kim Buck's work is extraordinary for its technique and what it delivers: drawing in which the graphite produces a highly photographic effect but as if the photo were deliberately or casually overexposed, or had tones dropped out: scenes reporting figures in a sere, bleached light, sand dunes, and a sense of abandon, that can read as happy or slightly tearful. But recognizably Australian and South Australian. Buck's work has the precious, fugitive quality of fading, deteriorating moving film when screened. The drawing is so minutely accurate that it reads as photographic—but it is undoubtedly selecting, heightening something the mechanical device couldn't or wouldn't and on which is built the pictures' strange effect. They are drawn with charcoal pencil on cartridge paper: heightened blacks, and the bleached white of detail left out, suggested but also reading emotionally as absence, buffeting wind and sea-spray, blown sand, the bodies recumbent in a way that acquiesces to light, gravity, landform.

They are strong and interesting images though scale is a problem. Hard to make them so, but bigger might be better.

Wendy Fairclough made glass, hand-blown simulacra—though deliberately monochromatic and thereby slightly ghostly: some stacked and warm and fluffy-looking towels, some household cleaning appliances. These were witty but also slightly comforting, affectionate. Or did I just feel I needed a friend at that moment? And her works were perhaps a gently satirical take on the notion of home, or 'Heimat' (since I introduced the term earlier). The bathroom, cleaning, and the kitchen: the domestic. One was entitled 'Acquiescence'. Not far from calling it 'Defeat'. Maybe. But in fact most of her grouped assemblages of things were benign rather than glowering or glum. It occurred to me to compare them to Michelle Nikou's cast domestic items. These last nearly always have a sharper critical spin on them.

Yhonnie Scarce is coming to seem an artist capable of producing work of great gravitas and beauty, memorializing (and, for white Australia, accusingly) indigenous lives, deaths, fortunes, their treatment at the hands of the State. Her work consists typically—at least over the last year or two—of very affecting massings of repeated blown glass elements (echoing natural forms—seed pods, say, or native fruits) that stand in for the indigenous body, indigenous fates. They look funereal, often, as well

as beautiful and they slow the viewer for the effort—the reflex—of contemplation. These work best where Scarce has control of a larger, framing room: at AGSA her work functioned less well, given a less emphatic corner to occupy. She showed to good effect at the AEF earlier this year.

Kate Breakey was another photographer, at the time a very young artist, showing, at the beginning of the 80s, at *The Developed Image* (to hark back to Ian North, earlier in this review). Two early influences on her were Ed Douglas (encouraging her towards landscape, I would suppose) and Micky Allan (who had been hand-colouring photographs for some years, to the consternation of purists but the applause of the public jury). Breakey's hand-colouring served to heighten without distorting, where Allan's was much more openly 'added' and often quite casual—in a kind of dialogue or play with the underlying photograph. At the time this left Breakey's early work seeming, by comparison, both romantic and too pretty. But Breakey powered up fairly quickly. While she lives mostly in the US these works show South Australian scenes. They are interesting, if not exactly challenging. Perhaps not exactly interesting, either. Some of the scenes are bizarre (two hills meeting in a 'V', with trees curiously angled, either side, on each slope), which is a kind of interest though little derives from it. But they are nice pictures, taken long ago and kept because they record long past but genuine moments and sites that have changed: so frozen time. The catalogue would have that they are "timeless, but I think only if we take that not to mean contemporary. The hand-colouring is now much more subtly and results in a sepia glow, sometimes a silvering chill, that makes the photographs look old, as do the compositional conventions they subscribe to, beautiful old landscapes, magically wistful. Maybe too good to be true.

Paul Sloan had a good amount of space and much of it was given over to a vast photographic representation of a camel in Australian desert: two photos, one print the reverse of the other, so that left side echoed in mirror fashion the right: two camels! They always look alien in Australia and serve to remind us of what has gone on here—Afghan camel drivers, Chinese miners, coolie labour in Queensland and so on. Bit bracing then. Sloan has an eye for a good image and his photographic pieces have before been successful on the whole—though as installation, as posited (photographic) 'fact' rather than as photography per se. Here, too, the image is striking—surreal, looming camels, desert, sea in the background & wonderful cloud behind, slightly solarised in appearance, the effect of filters of some sort I

would guess. But it is largely décor, scene-setting. (It might have carried a tasteful Calvin Klein or Dolce and Gabbana logo discreetly in one corner, though it didn't.) 'Planet Caravan' was the photo title. Other pieces worked tiredly gothic oppositions or encounters: an Australian owl atop a skull, for example.

Sloan's real talent is graphic energy, economy and swiftness of delineation. The manner seems the coefficient of a highly alert and political intelligence. He has typically shown banks of images: each interesting and, cumulatively, interesting as editorial and selection, as incriminating or fairly testing pleasure for the viewer: devilish associations and equivalences on the artist's part, are loaded up for us, the artist as a kind of programmer. For me Sloan's *Heartland* set worked less well because its meaning was too explicitly signaled. An Arabic head that, among his other images, would have seemed striking and carried a frisson of the illegitimately exotic about it, and raised questions as to why and exactly to what degree it was sign, symbol, or depiction: here it translated quickly to illustration, right-thinking statement of the Arab Spring/Middle East Wars thematic. A slightly content-less statement, as if raising the issue were enough. As if there were a theme-swelling soundtrack, a title and credits—but no story, or the *usual* story. One didn't look at the drawing very long in consequence. Sloan's best work works with far more contradictions.

There are also four pieces by Paul Sloan at Felt gallery—part of the *On Men* show (5—21). These are more in his usual vein, a set of six, three rows of two, closely abutting. Quick and graphic. Images relating to the Cronulla riots. These, too, are weakened by being surrendered too wholly, too immediately, to a meaning. But there is a bit of play between them, their styles, their subject matter, size of imagery etc. There are some nice balances between some of them in terms of light and dark, near and far.

Stewart MacFarlane's work I wrote on at length in review last year. I like them still, but I have nothing new to say. I think I like the Tasmanian-based pictures better than the South Australian—or better than these particular ones—but they were good: the same melancholy and air of hurt, threat, disappointment, and a gaze that purports to be objective while availing itself of all the drama of MacFarlane's multi-sourced style—born of Hopper, Alex Katz, Germans like Kirchner and Heckel and Beckmann, Fairfield Porter, and so on.

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The vocabulary of the curator's essay I found a little strange—as no doubt they might find mine. One artist's identity was said to be “unassailably” Australian? Is that not a bit strong? Whose was going to be assailed? But strong assertions are (state) gallery style. AGSA has a history of assurances—as if the punters look to the Art Gallery for something to believe in. The term “spiritual” seems equally unassailable in the AGSA view. It is regularly wheeled out, and confidently—they don't expect to be asked what it means, or what they believe in. More simply bizarre: one artist's drawing practice was said to be “largely based on having experienced the world on foot”. I look to the AGSA for certainty and this is what I get?

In fact, now that I think about it, State galleries seem happy to tell us what 'we' think. There's a lot of talk of “we” and “our”, part of the PR that reminds us of the job the Gallery is doing for us, the important job, our values, after all. Art as religion, the gallery as cathedral. Nick as pope? I thought he was more of an *impresario*.

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The sheer, footling pointlessness of **Gary Shead's** paintings (shown at Greenaway Gallery in conjunction with Ian North's *Haven 2001*) is either numbing or exasperating—numbing, I think, as a protection *against* impatience. The black-and-white work is better to look at, though to think about them... what was it Daffy Duck said?

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Christa Rosa's works (the *Heartland* show), straddling art and design, surf a number of going enthusiasms, attitudes, popular convictions—that I think I have no argument with. What are they though? A taste for the fragmentary and incomplete (suggestive of memory, patterns, association, reverie), for palimpsests and for scored and marked, encrypted surfaces (cartographic, historical—credos, desiderata, expressions of faith etc., positing wisdom, hunch, faith) which we view detachedly, but open to the work's (myriad) hooks or ways in. Each proves inconclusive, but of a duration we can determine (depending on mood). Call it meditation. Or meditative. Again, I'm all for it—certainly not against it. But does this work take us anywhere or simply decorate the viewer's present ideological steady-state, a visual mode that endorses and is endorsed by a normative 'where-we're-at'?

Hmm. All these observations, and the tone of rejection that is in them, indicates that this is craft, or design, *rather than art*, right? *Then* it can be forgiven. We can like them. And they *were* undeniably pretty good of their kind. In *Heartland* Rosa's works simulated marine plant forms—and a kind of lace-work, as the catalogue essay noted, intricate, graceful and organic.

I see my mood hardening around these issues (for the moment at least). I remember (I often remember) Art & Language artist Terry Atkinson's remark, *That it was no longer a question of technical, aesthetic competence but of "ideological competence"*. I love the statement for its testy late Marxist concision and the contempt that is freighted with it. I find it amusing. Maybe Atkinson did, too. (Lost battles, after all? A call that will not be heeded?) Ugly word though.

Lorry Humphreys, in *Blender* at AEA, showed a group of five paintings, each of just a few colours, graphic in style, on cheap cardboard, framed in charity-shop frames. Humphreys is content to leave the ply of the cardboard plainly visible. The paint was acrylic mixed with tempera (matt, not given to much nuance)—and they were graphic, almost ideogrammatic notations of (I think) semi-rural scenes or motifs. One was might have been depicted a water tank, or a hay bail—if you thought about it and tried to make an identification. But, 'at rest' with the art, one was often not engaged in making these identifications: they were marks one could enjoy looking at.

And then, there you were, thinking about them again, searching out and giving weight to various readings of space, volume, mass etc. All tentative, a bit as with hermetic cubism. The uncertainty was pleasurable.

Some marks did—pretty firmly, "firmly" because so swift and economical—designate space, boundary, depth and distance. It was their economy, even when diffident or provisional—that was so fascinating, admirable and entertaining; the reduced means (a few lines, the merest indication of a mass, an identifiable feature that said fence, oval, foreground, distance) were amusing—for being both acute and yet seeming detached. It was the opposite of Shead's parade of skill and olde-worlde art-effects. The Humphreys suite reminded me a little of Guston's 70s drawings, but still more schematic—and based, though, on the eye, on observation, whereas Guston was deliberately operating as cartoon. Guston's move to cartoon was a liberating move, and an apostasy or transgression, along with the return to figuration. He knew he was on to something: the abandonment of an enfeebling, shackling skill. As well as, in

Guston's case, the farewell to a late modernist style that for him precluded too much. Guston bailed. At some point Lorry Humphreys has too.

Another favourite line for me was when (Gary Catalano?) said of Ken Whisson that he "eschews all facility". Actually, I think he said he "struggled against all facility". It always makes me smile. Lorry Humphreys has skills: she has been painting for years: she was taught, long ago, by Thea Proctor and studied at Julian Ashton's. A very classic lineage. These works—powered up, trained, informed by years of seeing and depicting—abandon that confining safety to work with the merest scraps of delineation, silhouette, suggestion, the colour opaque, sometimes massing, obdurate, more physical than required, always provisional as drawing or representation. They conveyed the artist's satisfaction with them as notations—sufficient, adequate, exact, best left as they were, complete or incomplete, enough. I thought they were very good. Cezanne study meeting Japanese brushed ink calligraphy—unlike either but somehow in that territory. *How Zen Was Cezanne*, as Braque liked to joke. *And what of Mondrian?* Miro's rejoinder. Neither, of course, was talking about Humphreys. But they might have been.

Thinking all this over I see that North and Humphreys presume and address a thinking eye and invite the examination of our own responses and the codes that enable it, as well as offering the pleasure of the journey. Paul Sloan is interesting for the same reasons.

In the critical argumentation that, in the sixties, sought to advance a more conceptual art over late formalist painting Lucy Lippard remarked of Jules Olitski's work that it was mere "visual muzak". Much recent Adelaide art qualifies for that description, aspiring to be a kind of interesting wall-paper. A wallpaper, more accurately, conducive to rudderless mental drifting, for those who like that sort of thing. Much that isn't in the visual muzak line is instead designed to be logo for an attitude, or to be a talking point: curiosities, items that remind of an issue, though they rarely analyse it, objects or images that seek to endorse an already held liberal attitude of the viewer's. Typically they are well made—*objets d'art*, Design. Art as no threat. Art as—if not visual muzak—hymns to hum for the liberal converted.

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A little earlier in the year (April/May) **Sandra Uray-Kennett** showed the installation *a knight's tour through a rent in the wall* in CACSA's Project Space. The artist has worked memorably with the frames of lampshades and the overlapping shadows they can be made to cast. A constant theme of her work has been mental illness: schizophrenia, bi-polarity. Her art has often been concerned to project visual equivalents to it, representations of it. Uray-Kennett's

work has managed to do that while being abstractly powerful and usually powerfully throwing the viewer's own stability. *Knight's tour* worked with mirrors that one peered down into and they refused to verify what we expected. Physical disorientation as a metaphor for, and/or a hint of, a strange mental state. Uray-Kennett has her own reasons for this interest, but it is likely that, quite apart from those rationales, this focus is leading her to sculptural strategies that are interesting in their own right.