

10.9.14

BECOMING ATTITUDES

Artists: Madison Bycroft—*Synonyms for Savages*—Australian Experimental Art Foundation, May 22nd—July 18th—August 16th; Nicholas Folland—*The Extreme Climate Of Nicholas Folland*—AGSA, July 19th—Feb 1st, 2015, and—*Touch and Go*—Greenaway Art Gallery, July 30th—August 31st; Maarten Daudeij—*Black Hole Dreaming*—Tooth and Nail Gallery, August 22nd—September 6th; Paul Sloan—*New Bounty*—Hugo Michell Gallery, July 31st—August 30th; James Dodd—*Sabotage*—and Henry Jock Walker—*Froth Machine*—Contemporary Art Centre of South Australia, July 25th—August 31st; Sundari Carmody—*The Black Swan: Suite*—FELT Space, August 6th—August 25th.

by Ken Bolton

IS THERE ROOM IN THE ROOM YOU ROOM IN?

Two of the SALA Week artists are considered here, well, two at some length, others in less depth or fewer words. And the fact of there being two urges automatic comparison: the comparison may not bear on critical issues but does serve to introduce the two. I am considering **Madison Bycroft** and **Nic Folland**. Nicholas Folland, as befits the year's SALA monograph artist, is given something of a selected retrospective. But it is thinned out a little by extending to two or more spaces. He has a small

show of new work at Greenaway (*Touch and Go*) and a sampling of work (*The Extreme Climate Of Nicholas Folland*) at the Art Gallery of South Australia. In this last venue his work is interspersed with that of others (others whose work is deemed to parallel or otherwise lend supporting thematic context) and is spread through a sequence of connected rooms. It might have been a bigger showing and it might have been an exhibition of his work entirely. The reasons may be to do with the unavailability of significant pieces that have gone into private collections and collections interstate. Or it may have been a curatorial brain-wave of some sort, or that planning for the exhibition went awry. It does not look like full backing for the artist. Yet Folland's work deserves a full exhibition and it is a long while since he has shown solo in Adelaide, where he has been teaching for some time. That said, still the gallery is showing the work for a good long time: right through to February next year.

The work shown looked good, but any very full evaluation of Folland in what is more or less mid-career was not quite possible: there was not enough. Madison Bycroft, *by contrast*, is a young artist very much on the move and with public attention beginning to catch up to the fact of a string of early successes (the videos '*Omelas*' and '*Document of my Becoming Bovine*'—shown, I think, at Fontanelle a few years back, for example), and subsequent overseas fellowships and residencies, a Samstag scholarship and so on. Her single show, '*by contrast*', showed a good deal of work. An established artist, then, showing not much work, a taster; a new artist showing a good deal of work, inviting judgement.

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Nicholas Folland's work can seem very stable: but it develops, changes.

Madison Bycroft is in flux at an early stage in her career: often an artist's first moves come quite quickly with phases of work discarded and moved on from, lessons learned, attitudes firmed up on the way. Both artists relate via overlapping issues or themes: so their exhibitions could be seen as complementary. Both deal with climatic instability. Folland is more entirely verbless—I mean non-verbal—while Bycroft, despite evincing some principled hostility to language per se, is a good deal less so.

It would be possible to mount some argument about one being less mature, the other more mature. No one likes to be called immature. And possibly no avant-gardist wants to be regarded as blue-chip mature, either. Folland, for his part, evinces (that word!) some animus towards (or a degree of doubt regarding) the very notion of the avant-garde, the experimental, preferring the safety of “contemporary”. As a ‘contemporary’ artist one might feel less exposed to having one’s status challenged: easy to be deemed *no-longer-avant-garde*, safer to be contemporary. Maybe. But not really, there is always someone to invoke the category of the “genuinely contemporary”, the truly contemporary. And then where are you?

Nic Folland can take comfort in the fact that there seems not to be a lot of experiment about these days. The academy, too, is rather hostile to the notion of heroic avant-gardism, the notion of originality. Yet there are people out there curious about Madison Bycroft’s work because they deem it experimental. Bycroft is working in two or three modes, more or less contemporaneously. The work could be seen as experimental and yet *not* contemporary. Her work recalls the past: activist, eco-feminist; digital/video medium format; exhortatory, didactic, literal sometimes in its presentation; and ‘experimental’. One can respond to this as *passé*—though the work

has immediacy and freshness that counter this view—and it is undoubtedly relevant in a way that indicts the contemporary of having moved beyond anything deemed ‘too hard’, ‘no quick fix’. This is responsible experimentation. From one point of view it could be seen as regarding ‘the contemporary’ as a prisoner of style and market, as ‘having moved on’ (for novelty), leaving urgent problems unsolved. As if, Rome burning, and the alarm given, right, why not now get on with the fiddling?

Some of Bycroft’s work could appear dated if one failed to register it as a partly tongue-in-cheek revisiting of 80s and 90s rock clips and their aesthetic: these were two rooms showing brief MTV-styled clips. One, ‘*Prairie*’, featured a host of dancing, swaying penises. They looked amusingly like marine growths, plant-forms. Their soundtrack was a kind of awful, primitive computer-game buzz. Screening in the same room was a vignette, ‘*Uprising*’, showing Bycroft as god-like amazon survivor—survivor of men and of mankind—wiping out the humans to save the animals. In another room a short film ran—‘*Rag of cloth: Ode to the vampire squid*’—centering on an imperious and endlessly hungry empress-goddess figure: the aesthetic was Mayan, Aztec, maybe Byzantine (all as popularly imagined by Central Casting—of many years ago). It was amusing, and very well made: massed, banked rows of venerating idolators, insatiable and demanding goddess placed centrally and above, all very hieratic—lots of purple and gold, and pagan as all get out. Humans eating up the planet, as if by right. More, more, more.

But the most successful of Bycroft’s works resembled Folland’s—in their simplicity, their escape from genre, their removal from rhetoric or towards a quieter rhetoric.

One piece, *'Entitled/Untitled'*, showed a squid being washed and mourned *a la* Joseph Beuys; and there were the short, micro-short, moving-image pieces, grouped under the title *'Unsung: The primordial'*, each on a separate screen as one entered (in a darkened passage on the way into the larger exhibition space). One might start with these as they were recent and were every viewer's introduction to the show, performing an induction into its themes, its pace, its focus. One showed a crow on a rock repeatedly pecking at some small fragment of wood, food or vegetation, leaping after the latter as it moves. Just a few seconds, looped to repeat. It was intimate: we don't normally see this sort of thing so close, and repeated, so we take in the detail. It was very near: the noise loud, the movement abrupt, with what we might judge to be either aggression or vitality.

A second screen showed a young woman, only her head and shoulders above the level of the water in which she stood (a creek, lake or river, in woodland) playing one single note on a violin. This was both peaceful and beautiful and mildly unsettling: the violin teetered on either side of a single note. Staying out of the water was a balancing act. One might read this as a metaphor for civilization's 'going under' in the face of climate change: the violin as symbol of European 'high' culture and so on. (There is a parallel here with Folland's slightly antique cut glass in his work *'Doldrum'*.)

On another screen a young Afro-American guy rapped, but wordlessly: a non-language was uttered, seeming to search for meaning, communicability.

Similarly, on a fourth screen, a woman struggled to pronounce some single, difficult phoneme. Like the crow in its clip, the woman here was

looped to repeat some fragment of speech. As though the problem word was stuck physically on the tip of her tongue, the tongue not quite able to achieve leverage over it.

One of Bycroft's themes was to do with escaping language (its categories, its safety of known, labeled, tamed world), and of imagining an animal apprehension in which language does not mediate.

These very short items, endlessly looped, were terrifically well made, well shot and edited, well conceived so as to have a poetic intensity, a coherence and a self-sufficiency as more or less single-image things—and, each, to exist as forceful proposition, as forceful implication. And we apprehended them first as physical, as image, as outside language. Of course we explain them to ourselves, we translate them: but the viewer received them first as actual rather than coded, as fact rather than proposition and this fixed them fairly firmly in one's consciousness. Their being shown in near total darkness both made them more vivid and served to challenge the viewer's sense of control and safety, a slight disorientation. Perhaps the disorientation 'stood in' for the desired, fantasized removal of language. The sounds were valued pretty closely, so that they were (by intention) difficult to separate, the difficulty was both pleasurable and instructive.

The next work one was likely to engage with—depending on your route around the gallery space—was a (filmed) performance, completely untheatrical, very literal and very simply staged—'*Entitled/Untitled*'. In it Bycroft sits on the floor against a wall and unwraps from plastic a large Octopus, places it in her lap and carefully and respectfully unfurls its legs—to nurse it, mourn over it, grieve for its death. She gestures for some

scissors and cuts off her very long hair, then takes an electric razor and cuts it further. The whole mimics traditional human mourning and it is very moving, the figure of artist-and-animal conformed to the renaissance Madonna with the body of Christ, a pieta. Mourning and identification, sympathy. Two screens showed the action: in a special alcove a large, full-figure projection; on a nearer, small screen, the same action but focused only on close ups—of the octopus, or of the artist's hands unwrapping, unfurling limbs, washing the animal, cutting the hair and so on.

The exhibition as a whole—though many of the screened works featured headphones—reverberated to the sound of drumming: some of the sound came from one big work, filmed, screening on a wall, an indigenous Australian I think, drumming away while a parallel screen featured a kind of discourse on language or contra language. More of the drumming came as if from a large sculpture hanging in the middle of the gallery like a vast wisdom tooth, boulder or meteorite. The overall soundtrack that resulted was appropriate to the separate screened works—the avaricious, all-consuming pagan empress figure, the dancing penises etc. The drumming suggested warning, the primitive, secret code, ritual. Physiologically it kept the viewer alert and a little tense.

There was a long, long shelf of sculptural objects, mostly small. All were amusingly different and contrasting and in the lumpy I-know-nothing manner whose ungainliness seems so popular with younger artists of late. I didn't ponder these for long or at all conclusively, but they formed an 'alphabet' of letters, three-dimensional, and odd. There were some plants: a large, curving palm tree, some leafy, cactus-like plants. Plants and sculptural items used up—bridged—unwanted gallery space. Not their main intention, I'm sure, but better to have done that than not. The lone,

dramatically curved palm tree, clearly stood in for 'nature' and for nature in an artificial context.

Synonyms was a strong showing. It had humour and style; it was largely compelling (moving, in the case of the funeral rite for the octopus; elsewhere bringing one up against seemingly literal and physical 'fact' or observations of the real—the ultra short pieces with their intense visuality and single fragment of sound: the bird's purposive dance on the rock, the person's struggle with the physicality of pronunciation, the teetering insistence of that one keening, unsettling, maintained violin note—and the attempt to stay upright in the water, the violin dry—and so on). Parts of it were able to drive a tiny wedge between us and our conceptualizing, controlling, culturally shaped view of nature and the natural. Other parts signalled warning about our destructive—and self-destructive—consumption of the whole planet.

We're not in a very good position, ecologically, in the long term. Neither, vis a vis this issue, is art in a good position: can protest and hand-wringing, before an already converted audience, help much? Laboring the obvious is not art's job? (Hence the wish to get to the fiddling, the making of art?) Madison Bycroft is more than entitled to answer, What else is there more important to do? But crucially, if we are to save ourselves—in the unlikely event of our saving ourselves, or recovering in any way from the looming debacle and disaster—there is probably going to be a lot of science and technology involved, a lot of political discussion and organisation and re-thinking. It is not going to happen without language. (The catalogue essay was rather half-baked generally. Citing the old "violence of language" was not going to carry the day. It makes a rather violent thesis itself, in the author's hands, or 'hands'. 'Hands' being a (violent?) metaphor.) It might

be our 'nature'—human nature—which defeats our culture and ideas if we can't act upon our best ideas and intuitions, including ideas about our culture. We will need language to do so. In any case there is every reason to think that we have evolved with and via language: socialisation isn't possible without it, nor is society. We can't aim for a population of wolf-boys and Kaspar Hausers.

The exhibition's value lay in the experience it gave in those four short splinters of film-and-event in the exhibition's entrance—and in the memorable mourning and grieving enacted over the dead animal. These things addressed generalities but were themselves new and specific, not generic. Finally, Madison Bycroft's work has a performance-art dimension: she features in many of the filmed performances. This lent extra unity to the show, as did the high, clear light many of the actions were filmed in: gifting them a kind of unassailable facticity.

ICE IN YOUR GLASS, SIR?

Should an artist necessarily be seen to best advantage, seen in the truest light, only via an exhibition of many, massed works? Perhaps isolated instances suit the work better? The narrowness of the aesthetic, the repetition of elements from one work to the next might mean they work best apart from each other? It is a question. But in fact, a large-scale showing of Folland's work to date might be quite imaginable: maybe I do not need to mount this defence of his work. Nicholas Folland is clearly more than "an artist dealing in the many effects possible with cut glass".

AGSA's *Extreme Climate Of Nicholas Folland* opted to show a selection Folland's works interspersed among other, related works within its collection. This, as I viewed the show, provided a rest between each of his pieces, an aesthetic interval. So arranging his work to ensure that there was variety, no conspicuous sameness, was not an issue. Most of the artists shown in support of Folland's work were not interesting to me—some I regularly seek to avoid. Ian North's painting, *'The Wave'*, was the only exception that I recall: a terrific painting—long, horizontally formatted—of a clipper ship broadside on to a monumental and endlessly 'perfect' tsunami.

Folland's work is characterized by its simplicity, its focus at any one time on just one or two elements, or one or two aspects of a material. So, purity, and simplicity of means, the focus on just a *few*—the same few—materials and classes of object and the same few themes: glass, glass-ware, light, Victorian furniture (especially that which serves to enable domestic display: of heirlooms, objets-d'art, showpiece vases and bowls); and maps, the sea; heat and cold. By extension these are employed to mean weather, fate or fortune, culture and memory, fragility, change, impermanence and so on.

This could suggest sameness but usually doesn't. At least, the thought is dispelled when we consider the pieces—or are transported by their many different effects. It might be proposed that Folland's growing body of work derives from a constant, slow investigation and re-investigation of object and medium, for what more they can say if differently considered. It would seem a patient process, and to involve an alertness to the suggestiveness of the material—and to manufactured materials as well—and an alertness to their potential as metaphor, allegory, symbol, symptom or sign.

The earliest work at AGSA might have been *'Doldrum'*, a small boat with sail, listing a little, with glassware and crystal in it, substituting for pooled water, as from a leak in the vessel. The glassware really does look 'watery': the meaning I have always taken from this work is one of culture, 'old' culture (values etc) sinking us. *'Doldrum'* showed originally with a whole, small, specially constructed (and plumbed) room beside, in which water poured loudly: you looked in—and were immediately disconcerted to find the room within tipped at an extreme angle, and to see the gushing water, as within a ship. It engendered panic. It is a little close to cliché. The lone boat-in-the-gallery has too often stood, unquestioned, for the voyaging soul, fate, destiny etc—used by many, many artists. *'Doldrum'* has held up well enough, helped by the buoying effect of Folland's other work.

Maps also featured in that earlier exhibition—the same unmarked, blue-gridded cartographic paper as was on show now at AGSA: trackless oceanic water, disorientation, lostness.

'Am I missing something...', a sculpture which brought together ice-and-chandelier. The ice—a kind of growth, caused to grow, or perhaps simply maintained, by a refrigerating mechanism—was bulked around, and partly encroached upon, the light fitting. It worked a tension between feeble light, fragile electricity, 'heat' even—and the elemental, countervailing power of cold. The two parts of the equation (ice, which is Nature) and the carefully turned ornate wooden furniture ('Culture') are incommensurable. The sculpture holds them in a slow collision, suspended, both ongoing and static.

At the Art Gallery of South Australia Folland also shows *'Untitled (1—6)'*, one of his pieces in which light is thrown on walls, projected through antiquated glassware. The patterns made are enchanting and slightly ghostly, powder soft.

We saw that combination of animal and jewellery at AGSA—*'Untitled'* (and, at Greenaway, *'Fall Guy'* employs a preserved animal). There is an unwanted aesthetic category these could be assumed under—that of London tat boutique, where it is something of a cliché (recall Julia deVille)—and we saw it in work of a few Biennials ago (the stuffed animals under glass, given extravagant neo-rococo surrounds). It can seem too easy, a familiar 'move', of the sort available, too readily available, to non-artists who want to mock up something quickly that is 'arty'.

Read, though, in the light of Folland's other preoccupations, and they re-align themselves under a more sober dispensation: themes of endangered species, of trophies as a form of murderous veneration.

Greenaway Gallery (***Touch and Go***) housed a small number of Folland pieces. *'Fall Guy'*, a deer high on a wall, was one. It was caught in the attitude of stepping down from a boulder. The whole was mounted high, on a long pine-wood shelf. Across its back, and its head and shoulders, was a kind of swag: a wooden branch or limb, with a white plastic bag knotted to one end, hanging near the deer's muzzle. It reads as an indignity. The bag looks like casually disposed of rubbish. I think I liked it better than the deer-head piece in AGSA: less decorative, or less merely decorative.

The Greenaway exhibition, as with AGSA's showing, was a little too spare to alter one's view of Folland's work, or to add a great deal to it. Even so,

one was glad to see it. There was a series of nine hand-embossed prints, *'Blind/Fold'*, monochrome white—which were 'nice', a word hard to employ without sounding ironic, which I don't intend: more specifically, they were interestingly a puzzle (physiologically rather than mentally) for the eye to work with, register, compare one panel with the next. The embossed motif that each bore was taken from old glassware. So, consistent.

Folland's work divides into the camps of art and Design: some works have mostly visual appeal and novelty, not a great deal of cultural load, some will be taken by many in entirely that spirit. It is not a problem, and it likely increases his chances of a permanence within the archive. One can imagine some pieces being favourites within that part of state gallery collections devoted to design, the decorative arts, while others will be at home in the contemporary art collection. In some cases a work generally received as 'design' might carry significance its success as design has disguised. A work like *'Throng'*—(at the Greenaway *Touch and Go* exhibition)—a long glass tube or beaker, suspended to hang (clamped in fact) vertically a few inches out from the wall, with a rubber bulb shape on top—looks coldly beautiful: the chill of scientific precision, of scientific process and method. All of these associations stem from the now 'antique' nature of the fittings (functional stainless steel, glassware) and one's vague notions of Bunsen burners, test tubes, vacuum sealed gases. These associations are much more 'on call' in an art context than a purely 'design' one, so it can depend on the gallery's white cube context.

Overall Folland's work was striking, just and measured, thoughtful, and quietly confronting. He has been represented in Adelaide for some time by showings of single pieces and these can sometimes seem wonderfully wrought, sumptuous even, but in isolation a little anaemic conceptually.

But the work under discussion holds those charges at bay. And there are major works, like *'Floe'* and others, not part of either show. So, is the verdict in? There was no retrospective, so in that sense the artist has not invited one. And Nicholas Folland is in mid-career, as said before. Two views are possible. The majority report might be shaping as, *Wow, love that stuff!* A minority view might regard the work as like the fiddling in Madison Bycroft's clip—pretty close to one note. That is, is the oeuvre, with each addition, adding up to much? Apart from the glass-stone-heat and cold, there is only that sequence of deliberately and comically failing, mock trophies. At the moment these seem very much a footnote, time-off from the real work. As art the whole might be regarded as elegant fiddling ... 'while-Rome-burns', sort of thing. An elegy. If the Design camp claims the work—this is to second-guess posterity (who knows what *they'll* get up to?)—Folland's pieces will pass into acceptance as enigmatically beautiful pieces with a subtext or anecdote that attaches to them (a note that says "to do with climate change") and a bio note that says "Nicholas Folland also exhibited as an artist".

DREAM, GREEN ANT, DREAM!

Maarten Daudeij—(*Black Hole Dreaming* at Tooth and Nail Gallery)—sits somewhere else than Bycroft or Folland—the difference down, I think, to a particular European training. Post-sixties German art seems to regard the various available styles as *shsticks* that are available to it, part of a tool kit—think Sigmar Polke, Kippenberger. They don't buy into any of them as an 'ethic', a way, to which you must be true. Dutch-trained Daudeij, in the time he has been in Adelaide, has produced a number of quite distinct

bodies of work. (From memory—a quasi constructivist and rather vertiginous intervention into the internal architecture of the Felt Gallery; an exposition of a kind of voodoo-magic ‘Otherness’ in the CACSA project space; an interesting show out at Fontanelle.)

Where Folland would seem to have a small constellation of closely related themes and a small range of materials (glass, rock; exploration and climate), with work deriving from these things, as they are reconfigured, turned over, re-examined, Daudeij addresses any number of themes, or of formal problems, with styles and manners that are simply ‘available’. There seems little inhibition around notions of what is contemporary style, what is permissibly novel (Is it novel enough, not too novel? asks the contemporary artist). Maarten Daudeij lays himself open to responses that could see his work passed over, as romantic, old-fashioned, eclectic, unprofessionally amateur. The work, though, is strong enough to conquer any viewer’s sudden panic at possibly viewing something uncool.

A number of Daudeij’s works seem to simply ‘name the theme’, and the first, *‘Benevolent God’*, works, merely, to syphon off initial viewer tension: a standard ‘smiley face’ in black on a convex chromium mirror disk. It might signal both ‘welcome’, and a sarcastic inadequacy (imputed to us—or to the artist—or to white Australia generally) before the ‘landscape-and-ur-truth’ mission of the overall show. A second piece, small and postcard-sized almost, consisted of Michelangelo’s *‘Pieta’* situated in the high, overexposed colour and light of the Australian outback.

A group of four carved or moulded heads came soon after. One, *‘Sage’*, was a tree stump, very roughly carved, and just enough to indicate ‘face’. It reminded of sculptures by Georg Baselitz. Next to it, *‘Laden Light’* was a

face made of scrunched and battered lead sheeting, folded over a piece of rock, mounted on another (a stone neck) and the whole on another larger rock. It looked like Australian 1950's public sculpture and also reminded, reminded me at any rate, of the hard and harsh faces of Albert Tucker, of Brack's hard Australian faces. On its head was a small fedora that rendered him an Australian 'everyman', or 'man-in-the-street'. Reading the face as cruel, indifferent etc seemed available—but less sure over time—he might be just another punter.

Another head was helmeted, WWII-style. A fourth was very quickly moulded in red-mud clay. Each of the four was mounted on the sort of evidently improvised stand that might be found in a junk yard.

On wall near them was *'The Hardest Word'*, the word 'Sorry' in barbed wire. Maybe the only wrong note in the exhibition.

How sorry are these four, the sculpted heads? Uncaring? *Very* sorry—but aware of the sentiment's irrelevance or inadequacy?

Next came some intense visionary paintings, mostly heads (traditional 'expressive' male portraits, but also a landscape photograph, *'Deep Shine'* (showing ecstatic—or broken and expiring—trees crucified before the light of the low sun behind them), and a portrait face (*'The Goddess'*) treated so that it resembled the trees-motif and also recalled an abstract piece from further back in the hanging (*'Infernal Landscape'*) that fanned upwards and to left and right, approximately symmetrically—like a small version of some of the more exultant Aboriginal paintings of the last few decades, or even late Tony Tuckson—but with great pressure on the conventions by which it might be read: was this representation, abstraction, was it 'visionary'?

'Infernal Landscape''s white fan of marks were laid over a black ground, centered.

All of these develop from the process of drawing (sometimes smearing and finger-painting) with both left and right hands simultaneously. The works look 'expressionist', but also like revelations, intimations, visionary. The less skilled left hand disarms the work of the right, both handicapping it and feeding it visual data that must seem both gift and problem.

At various points in the exhibition there are sequences of paintings—or drawings—more or less monochrome, made of just a few lines or of large, rough spots or daubs. *'Hymns from the Heart'* were four. These, and more especially the eight casual, variegated rosy purple stripes that made up *'Seeing Itself'*, could be seen as taking Fred Williams' most minimal stylings of landscape and cavalierly having them read as alternately *optical and perceptual* (a thoroughly bleached, blinded, washed-out light through tree-trunks) or as *denotative*, merely signifying. These readings are an act of visual imagination on the viewer's part, available, commonplace, because of the amount of gradually more abstract painting from the last half a century of Australian painting—and because of our long fixation on landscape as source of mystical or national 'truth'. Daudeij seems to tap this vein and to be able to do so without affirming either belief or satisfaction. The work is intense and yet casually offered. The two-dimensional pieces are all unframed, for example. All works are on paper. As a constellation they seemed interestingly to propose a fist-full of meanings, propositions, attitudes, around 'Australia', the land, the 'interior', 'Europe-meets-the-ancient-continent'—and, although 'intense', to offer them with a certain lightness.

The chosen styles or modes (the “panoply” I conjectured as available to many European artists)—line drawing that is ‘expressive’; work that seems to relate to depictions of light effects; others that report shape and profile; as well as the manner of works not mentioned (the motif of the lone house occurs in paintings and drawings and as a small sculpture—with the conventional symbolism that would have it signify ‘a way of life’, an essential isolation, a ‘house on the prairie’)—are all offered provisionally. Daudeij places these styles or modes in epistemological crisis—to deliver their findings, their ‘truths’ or insights—while the conventions of Western, post-Renaissance representation are tested, probed, interrogated. The artist’s confidence lies with this overall procedure (as something reasonable, something possible) while the experiment that is each work is provisional, a proposal, an assaying. Figure and ground, surface and depth, black and white are at times ambiguous or reversible in much of Daudeij’s work here and this uncertainty or instability is perhaps the strongest metaphor operating in the show.

THE GHOULY BIRD

Paul Sloan—(*New Bounty*—at Hugo Michell Gallery)—showed a series of photographic tableaux based on seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Dutch still-life ‘vanitas’ paintings: centrally, a skull surrounded by ‘pleasures’ (food, drink—amusingly, cans of caffeine-laced energy drink), with an owl perched on the skull, or perched nearby, in some cases a dead rodent in its talons. They have sombre lighting that throws the objects into relief against a black ground. The blackness would be ‘the void’. One or two butterflies enliven some of these with brilliant colour—being the soul, evanescent life? The owl observes us closely.

This is all pretty close to pure corn and cliché. The work doesn't have the energy, and cannot convey the cheerfully sardonic stance, of Sloan's quick, graphic painting. The hand of the artist is removed and its brutal abbreviations and reductions are unavailable. The mechanical nature of photography gives something more soulless. (The photographs deal with the given—that is, conventions, the actuality of the props or objects—and can't do much with it except give photography's sharp focus and mechanical verisimilitude.)

I find photographic revivals or simulations of previous eras' paintings—like Anne Zahalka's German burgher portraits of art world personalities—simply twee, dead in the water aesthetically. Usually the ploy involves, too, parading an irritating complacency, as if the works have played some trump card. A few of Sloan's pieces escape that centripetal pull of Dead Art: but it is touch and go: the gravitational pull could drag them back if the viewer's goodwill slackened even for a moment. These successes-against-the-run-of-play were a couple (from Sloane's *'Knowing the Interior'* series) that featured just bird and skull, that least recalled Vincent Price on the one hand or the Dutch masters of this seventeenth-century genre.

With *New Bounty* the artist might be thought to have attitude, assumed to have it—but the pictures do not, though they might intimate that they do. What they proffer instead of the paintings' style and messy verve is 'production values'.

BIG BIKE, BRO'

James Dodd showed some amusingly morphed bicycles in *Sabotage* (at the Contemporary Art Centre of South Australia)—tall, with taller seating, above big wheels. The idea was to give height that would enable the filming of suburban backyards from above fence height. The film that resulted seemed not very interesting or revealing though at least it provoked censure by the police—always good for one’s ‘engaged’ status. Drones might soon make such snooping possible, and hard to police. Another group of bikes were laden with equipment that allowed them to become in effect a radio station, able to broadcast from wherever they were. And there was a painting or two—not, as far as I could see, related to the main works: but okay, certainly, one abstract in particular.

Some of the work Dodd does best—almost knocking it off with ease, I suspect—is going on show at the Australian Experimental Art Foundation as I write, in *135th Meridian-East*. These are comic-strip styled scenes—wrecked or abandoned cars, a police van—in bold black, over one or two day-glo colours, with graffiti added. The genre look is vaguely noir-realist Pop. The graffiti is integrated within the painting, where in other works I’ve seen, it has featured as if simulated, as if added to the picture, and has seemed very ‘fake’. In these recent instances it works well—though the graffiti’s status, as ‘in’ or ‘on’, is sometimes indeterminate. These pictures look both declamatory, charged-up, and *decorative*—the colours sometimes very sweet. It constitutes a distinct line of work, one of many in Dodd’s practice, sometimes at the service of the larger project, at others generating works that stand on their own. They may no longer be so significant to the artist, but I wonder: he gets better and better at them. *Sabotage*, too, is the title of a monograph on James Dodd, released by CACSA to coincide with the exhibition.

SUPPORT BAND STEALS SHOW

In tandem with Dodd's *Sabotage* was **Henry Jock Walker's *Froth Machine*** (in the CACSA Project Space). It posited a VW Combi covered in outlandish apparatus used for living, and documenting, an emblematic surfing lifestyle—and covered in the marks of that attempted project. This prop is absurd and slightly 'wonderful'. The main interest is a looped film of the artist surfing while making art. 'Making Art' here is symbolized by surfing with small paint boards in hand: to allow the water and the wet ride to influence or determine the result. Inane. But amusing. One entrancing scene has Walker surf in over a long flat stretch of gloriously transparent water: shot from above, so that the seaweed below the surface makes an endless brilliant green floral pattern. As he approaches the shore, 'painting' in hand, Walker has the board spin in a constant revolving pattern before the small, driving swell. It is endlessly watchable. The Combi in the actual space is covered in tools and machines, but also covered in paint, which film shows being emptied, sauce-bottle style, from the car as it speeds along. The exhibition, in line with other productions by Walker in the past, is a triumph of enthusiasm, gusto and *joie de vivre*.

WALK THIS WAY

Sundari Carmody's *The Black Swan: Suite* had two parts, well, three, four. In the space of FELT Gallery the artist was in place at a work table, with a vast amount of a dark material, working on a large projected piece, a map of the southern sky's constellations, upon which she was embroidering a white or silver thread to heighten the effect.

But this map of the heavens has other content, too, in progress at least: “the real positions of the stars in the Southern skies, but also of invisible projected constellations of dreams, aspirations and emotions.” These same skies—seen by Sundari Carmody and by suffragette Elizabeth Grover.

On the wall hung a banner featuring the ‘black swan’. It is a banner made by Western Australian women and taken by a small group to London for a suffragettes march, a ‘monster march’ (five miles long) around 1910. Elizabeth Grover, a nurse, was one of these.

The third piece is the video, four minutes on a loop, in which the black swan banner is marched through various streets, back streets, suburban lanes, past factories and warehouses, storage depots. It makes a very pleasant view: the banner is striking, and two little legs of a smocked figure carry it, bear it, through these spaces. Filmed always from head on, at a fair distance, the banner in its progress looks all of brave, troubled, cutely funny, noble—as it is shifted by the breeze, alters in the shifting light—and it looks generally, on balance, moving. It is Carmody carrying the banner.

At the work table is also a rack of work smocks, timeless, that the artist is making—another act of sewing—and, thereby, of identification with the women who made the banner. The smocks themselves suggest work, utility, duty.