

LOUISE, JENNY, JOHN

Artists: Louise Haselton—*Outsides*—Australian Experimental Art Foundation, October 16th—July 18th—November 22nd; Jenny Watson—*I woke up in France*—and John Foubister in *an end of year group exhibition*—Greenaway Art Gallery, November 19th—December 19th

by Ken Bolton

THE BEAUTIFUL VISIT

Well, a successful show with two or three sequences of very strong work.

Louise Haselton's '*Seven pieces for Chauncey Gardiner*' were characterized by sharp silhouettes, whose éclat gave each work unity, singularity, impact. The exhibition—***Outsides***—generally was rather graphic, not just this series: shapes against a white wall. As 'objects' they retained a sculptural identity, but by and large they were not about sculpture's mass or volume or an in-the-round existence. Much of Haselton's work from *errand workshop* (2011 at CACSA) had been similarly graphic and linear, but, even so, it danced out in space, not against a wall. In *Outsides* the white of the walls, and bright and focused light, featured very strongly: it enabled the silhouettes to cut a dash—but as graphic shape or sign.

But it is a matter of degree. Because, upon examination—though the 'planar' versus 'three-dimensional' distinction holds—still some of the same humorous and sly capering is going on in *Outsides*. A few pieces could easily have been in earlier shows.

With the '*Chauncey Gardiner*' sequence the viewer came first upon a dark skirt spread fan-wise on the wall, creating a wonderfully quick, joyous shape. A dark line detached itself from below the skirt, like a trailing muffler on a car, or the arm of a paper-cutting guillotine. Was it the same material, a kind of detaching hem? Was it something else? Was it line or (sculptural) object? It had that extra body (though uncertainly registering) that allowed it to read as object—which made it sit then oddly with the more two-

dimensional dress shape (flat apart from its pleating). Close to, one could see this line was a rubbery substance: perhaps hose, perhaps hose enclosing lead. Viewed from a more usual gallery distance and it reverted to line.

Another work was an ovoid shape, with just enough inflection to perhaps suggest 'ear'—and the material was interestingly, teasingly, indeterminate: a rich and luscious rubber, or something harder, but—alternately—an inert, nerveless graphic line. That is, 'sign'. The colours were mostly palely prosthetic. These just-off-ovoid hoop shapes Haselton has used before: they always curiously defeat 'scale' and resist being consigned as read, understood.

A third piece looked to me like a spine, vaguely chiropractic, vaguely natural history museum fossil exhibit. A long, curving spine, as of a dragon, say, in a dark material with wooden picnic plates as vertebrae. It tensed between the unity of the spine identification and the binary of the two constituents: serpentine line and plates. The gallery lighting threw three shadows, two of a very pale kind and one more sharply dark: all close to the object itself and lending slight but definite intensifying of line and of three-dimensionality.

The penultimate piece in the series aped the notion 'painting'. It was a rectangle of mirror-finish perspex in a purple-mauve metallic colour. A single object, a 'painting' by virtue of quoting the format. But at the same time the composition 'within' the painting was of three rectangular shapes made by draping cuts of material over the surface. The three were of unequal length, and different as colours—some hessian? some carpet offcuts?—and they made of the remainder the painting's fourth element, compositionally, the metallic mauve/purple. So again the teasing binary: unitary painting, or made thing, or by some stretch, a 'collage' of pieces. These scare quotes, though, give an idea of the works as more arch than they were.

This 'painting', compositionally, echoed or mimicked the work on the ground to its right: a breeze block with a tower of three irregularly bulked out tubes. (These last were made of the cane-work usually seen on chairs.) (The tubes looked at first like filters or mufflers, I thought.) The tube tower ran, in slightly ungainly manner, up from the right end of its heavy, anchoring, breeze-block base. So a square shape on the left (the cement) and a vertical on the right (the tower three-piece). The painting had the same area of mauve-purple mirror: a line of it across the bottom of the painting (where the 'draped' material had not reached all the way down) and continuing up to the top of the rectangular format's right side—like the sculpture's 'tower'. In both cases a reversed 'L'.

Another piece made an amusing visual joke: it read as a simplified pictogram for 'dancer': some cardboard tubing extended down to the ground at a shallow angle. At its top it grew into a kind of

lumpish leg-of-lamb mass, just vaguely pelvis shaped. From that pelvis, in the other direction, at a steeper angle, was another cardboard leg, bent at the 'knee' (made simply by busting the cardboard open) from which a relatively vertical lower leg then made it to the ground. It suggested a dancer doing stretches. Or an arthritic elder doing stretches. The broken knee was fondly funny.

One of the signature pieces for the show—featured on the exhibition poster and on the catalogue sheet—reminded me a little of simple Robert Motherwell collages, though far bigger: it worked a woolen material, dark grey-brown, against pieces of flat white Styrofoam packaging: clean, white, valueless but sharply contrasting with the expensive wool. The format was of a two-dimensional work. The 'idea' read as graphic and was immediately assimilable from a distance as such. Though on approach, the relative values of the two materials began to alter and what one knew to be an object of two intercut materials, one threaded through the other, began to assert its status as *physically* present, not just optically so.

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Over the last decade or maybe more, Louise Haselton has become a major presence in Adelaide art—with work that is conspicuously light, ephemeral and free of all signs of heavy lifting: no puff, no sweat, no effortful straining after effect or weightiness. Such seeming virtues can transform over time into the excuse for an artist's work being forgotten: evaporation. The work had signalled its intended effect and was granted to have produced it—but it hadn't finally done the job: it was all intention (well-meaning and therefore liked, endorsed) and not much art, leaving just its desire to be liked. Typically such work is remembered less and less fondly over time, remembered as simply 'of its time'. Haselton's work, though, stands well clear of these charges, well clear of this fate.

Rather than diminish in the memory—and these exhibitions have been a fair way apart—the memory of previous shows remains sharp and develops within the viewer as a kind of need: *When will I see something like that again?* So Haselton's exhibitions open with a great deal of attendant expectation among viewers, even a little reserve of fear: *What if it doesn't work this time? What if I don't like it as much as I'd hoped, or if I've 'seen it before' and the work carries no charge or it doesn't fully 'deliver'?* This anticipation has made for big opening nights and good attendances. Haselton has also been a very effective teacher and so there is a generation of artists who have benefitted from her advice and her attention. In consequence her development is watched closely.

The relevant exhibition history could be mapped as running from 2003's *Small Crowd* (at the AEF) to 2011's *errand workshop* (at CACSA) and the ***Outsides*** exhibition (just shown at the AEF and described here)—with smaller tastes and intimations between times at Greenaway, the AEF, SASA and elsewhere. The *Small Crowd* show was very good work—a little sombre—and the intellectual

abstraction it dealt in, and sought to confuse, was possibly a farewell to some earlier preoccupations. *Errand workshop* was the eye-opening revelation of where Haselton had gone since then. It was exhilarating, an exhilaration her work has continued to produce subsequently and has done again in *Outsides*.

While *Small Crowd* was much less popular than these later exhibitions there are continuities of method, though masked by differences of sensibility and the move away from addressing things conceptual. Haselton seems to work systematically and in a combinatory way, usually a combine of binaries in which the two parts and the unity the work makes of them stand in different interesting degrees of tension. Processes—of when and where to collect material, and limitations as to how much, or to kinds of material collected—seem to be followed both equably and strictly. And the rule here might be that inert, discarded material alone will be chosen, that the things chosen will come from different worlds: plant forms from the gutter or footpath, neighborhood industrial rubbish, say.

The '*Seven Pieces for Chauncey Gardiner*' are not individually titled. But each piece in the sequence seem to present as a Solution: presto! As if they have bounded onto the wall. There is an implied fanfare or drum-roll, partly ironic, partly demotic and self-deprecatory. In that sense, taken that way, there is something about the works that is gestural, as if they were demonstrations.

To my mind there were two principal parts to *Outsides*: the '*Chauncey Gardiner*' works and the group assembled on a very large counter or box, centre gallery, under the title '*Explanatory Gaps*'.

These last were free-standing, each about 50 to 60 cms high and between 50 and 30 cms in length. They were irregularly wide, but 'thin' basically. Eruptive or tortured approximations to sewing machine shapes. Not easily explicable. And in this case the binary that these works 'bound' were—(or is it "was"?)—ugly non-shape on the one hand and, on the other, a beautiful surface to the principal form. These works were a series of combinations—of angrily vitalist organic base in each instance (made of grapevine cuttings, hard, dry, angular and harshly pruned—caste in bronze and painted a glossy kack brown) and a more stolid shape that bridged the two ends of the vine-base, or which arched between them (like the arch presented by a sewing machine, or the arch of a horseshoe magnet). The arch shapes were bulkier and wrapped or bound in multiply coloured thread. So, an ungainly shape on a more readable but rather off-putting, agonistically writhing base—the arch-shape made delectable, endlessly varying and eye-catching, by means of the variety of covering, binding, coloured thread.

'*Explanatory gaps*' worked more slowly than the '*Chauncey Gardiner*' set. Well, plainly the latter had instant appeal, with a slow-burn contradiction or trick to each: am I one or am I two?

'*Explanatory gaps*' seemed to me almost sullen by comparison, but once one got close enough the retinal pull of the arches' surfaces (all pretty exactly similar) drew one into a different engagement. This, too, is an experience of a binary: a before and an after. Are such 'binaries' legitimately regarded as properties of the work—before and after, ugly from a distance captivating up close? Maybe not. May be. (And it might have been more the case that each cancelled the other: up close you forgot what they were like from afar, and vice versa.) The duration, the greater duration, of the relationship they set up with the viewer, made the '*Explanatory gaps*' experience a more intimate engagement, one tested more, over more time, over more repeated looks or investigation. Weightier, then, than the '*Chauncey Gardiner*' works.

But that should have been a question. "Weightier, then, than the '*Chauncey Gardiner*' works?" Maybe no. If any of the '*Gardiner*' works took your fancy properly you did begin to have the same long engagement—pleasurable entrapment—with the piece. A close-up examination permitted one to satisfy curiosity, and often rewarded the close up view, too, but basically it allowed one to step back and entertain the work's proposal: I am one, I am two; I am shape, I am object(s); I am thing, I am a particular meaning or resemblance. And perhaps the in-principle animus of the show was, in any case, one against weightiness?

The problem Louise Haselton's work must defeat or face down is to do with 'Beauty'. A too obvious beauty, a beauty that comes with no bitters in it, no slight challenge, rules itself out of contention under modernist rules. Postmodernism had allowed it, but only as a conscious and self-advertising break with those same rules: amusingly beautiful, wickedly beautiful, nauseatingly beautiful, and so on. Think 'Jeff Koons', say. (Basically it is no longer very sophisticated, or novel. That is, the problem isn't, nor are the standard solutions.) Haselton's work does not invoke the postmodern amendment. Her work is post-modern (or contemporary) more neutrally, not as a program of negation and acting-up, of parody and pastiche.

Still, Haselton's work does bring the thrill of beauty—coming in guises that seem unlikely and novel: savingly, beauty is delivered fresh. The works are pretty consistently surprising in shape, curiously and amusingly off-kilter, just-perfectly wrong. The tower of not quite identical tubes on a breeze block (the last in the '*Chauncey Gardener*' series) is a case in point.

And then, though I don't imagine Louise Haselton is very much exercised by the problem, the '*Explanatory gaps*' group embraced ugliness anyway. And converted it, or succumbed to its charm. Maybe ugliness was 'the Other'? The '*Explanatory gaps*' remained obdurately object, each of them, and resistant to meaning. Their appearance as tortured, tensed, was a reading one got past, into an

engagement with their brilliantly coloured surfaces and with the lumps and bumps contained beneath. The work was to do with the formal without being strictly formalist: it probably buys into considerations that are lately termed *the new embodiment* and which plays with the emotional latency or valency of different materials and surfaces: carpet that is discarded offcut, rush matting that is industrially produced, then rolled to resemble something else (car filters, I have suggested) and all with their history of being devalued, rejected: rubbish carpet (urban detritus), rubbish frond (dead nature).

In Haselton's hands these combinations of living and 'dead' materials almost always produce an outcome that is itself enlivened. There is a kind of sympathy between the parts, even an affection in their facing off or balancing one another. The cane-matting tower—unstable, wobbly, organic—seems an outgrowth of the breeze-block, its straight man. The inert line beneath the dress (the latter humanised, girlish) comes alive as it partners the dress, counterbalancing it.

Haselton's eye would seem to make no judgement preferencing either half of her equations: there are no hierarchies—each surface, each material and colour, is to be experienced and valued. These are attitudes that may derive from the artist's interest in aspects of Japanese ikebana and its sensitivity to materials and from her experience of Indian cultures—their pantheism and animism, their tolerance and celebration of diversity.

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The Ben Leslie-Louise Haselton works: there are two bodies of work from the show I haven't discussed as yet, *'The loveliness of the catacombs'* and *'Five necklaces for Uncle Toecutter'*. Both groups are works Haselton made with Ben Leslie's connivance, working her usual tricks while combining things with fragments of Leslie's own, mostly discarded, sculpture. These were generally pastel-painted and ruggedly wooden—the *'Catacombs'* works—or, in the case of the *'Necklaces'*, more distinctly planar things, (again) arranged on a wall, Sharp forms, mostly dark, the *'Necklaces'*, a few recalling early Picasso or Braque collages and papier collées—but pumped up in size, slightly more cartoony: recalling the cubists' guitars and mandolins in at least one case, a ghetto-blaster, I think, in another. These were amusing, but a little 'lite' in comparison with the pure Haselton products. And saying so I think indicates how serious Haselton's work is. I've been attributing to *Outsides* insouciance, humour, and playfulness: but in their pure form we take those things seriously (again, without feeling heavy about it). The Haselton-Ben Leslie pieces were a little more merely facetious, sometimes cute. The *'Catacombs'* pieces looked like badges or brooches, enlarged. A few looked like icecreams. I am reporting viewer response.

'Walking out of nothing' was another suite of Haselton works—and the first one saw on entering the gallery—five hand-made tubular concrete bases, tall and thin, a little irregular. Each carried a frond or branch of fallen or discarded plant material. They were handsome and when they brought the viewer close enough transcended their seeming identification with autumn window-dressing. They weren't just interesting décor. The specimens chosen were intricate, as plant forms often are, with the feel of African sculpture, of great craftsmanship, of very sure design. And in this they were faintly exotic and faintly alien. They reminded us of how far we are from nature, many of us, how little we really do look at it apart from glimpsing flowers-in-the-garden, or glancing at the weather. As is usual with Louise Haselton pieces, they possessed startling and dramatic profiles. These did exist in-the-round, despite striking their attitudes before the white of a wall. It was their fate to serve as introduction to the show and to go not closely examined by many visitors.

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A month out from the exhibition the artist asked me to write for the show's catalogue: Louise said she wanted a poem. We are old friends and, as I think highly of her work, I was pleased to supply the words: it was an opportunity to attempt a slightly unusual exercise. I like poems that attempt to make quite literal, unpoetic sense—that are discursive and don't regard the fact as un-aesthetic, that are able to change registers (like Louise's art), that, abandoning the discursive, work with ungainly combinations of collage and assemblage (just like Louise's art) and so on.

The poem I wrote is an exercise in recalling the character of her work and anticipates something of the same from the coming show. I started by pastiching the opening lines of a Frank O'Hara poem: partly as a way of getting started, partly as a nod to the very 1950s practice of gracing a gallery sheet with a poem. The practice quickly became passé: the poems weren't good enough and art had moved to distance itself from those kinds of rhetoric. And it didn't want to cede authority to 'the word'. Not the literary word, at any rate. The professionalising of the art world—only imminent in O'Hara's day—would not tolerate it. As part of the art world, I hated those poetic effusions too. On the other hand, who, generally, wants to read curator-speak?

So I was grateful to Louise for trusting me to do this.

Anyway, I say all this to allow the reader to take all the evaluations above with a grain of salt if they would like. Friends? Too cosy? Though I think if I had not liked the exhibition I would have been quick to undermine it or, as Louise is a friend, to have avoided comment altogether. I did like it.

I've written on Louise Haselton many times in the past: most of it is available on this *FormGuide* site: if you are interested check the following pieces: *Vol 13.1 Game On*; *Vol 12.1 untitled*; *Vol 13.3 Where Went The Angst?* and an earlier profile on Louise from 2002.

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AT GREENAWAY'S

At Greenaway Art Gallery is Jenny Watson—*I woke up in France*—and an end of year show, of worthy though usual suspects from the Greenaway stable, but including work from the chronically and unjustly unheralded John Foubister. In Foubister's case a sequence of six identically formatted abstracts—semi-abstract and in some cases tenuously figurative landscapes. Foubister was last given attention, perhaps even exhibited last, a good while ago. He was part of that bumper crop of young artists that flourished briefly in Adelaide at the end of the 80s and through the 90s, to rapidly diminishing returns and opportunities in an art scene too small to do more than acknowledge them. Some of the 'stars' almost achieved national recognition, or the beginnings of it before they too succumbed to economic pressures, got jobs, quit art, practised on a hobby-iste's basis. That generation included Bronwyn Platten, Craige Andrae, Shaun Kirby, Simryn Gill, Anton Hart, Andy Petrusevics, Annette Bezor. This is to restrict oneself to the names that are remembered or still current. John Foubister, working at painting, with no modish irony or an acceptably make-it-new attack on its conventions, was always going to get less support. He sure did. It is great to see this evidence—the tip of an iceberg of work, I gather—that he has kept on and that the quality of the product is so far up there.

The paintings were all more or less 60 by 80 cms, landscape format. It is an abstract mode that would seem to be borne out of casual yet particularising notations, where, at different stages, the notational and descriptive agendas are surrendered to the demands or pull of the non-figurative picture whose terms will be compositional, to do with pace, weighting, mood, coherence. Some of these paintings, then, register as landscape, others as abstract but derived from observation, still others as only vestigially tethered to the motif, or as no longer concerned to assert their origin in reportage of any kind.

I was put in mind of early Guston abstracts-meets-Ken Whisson, meets him and frees him up. The colour was higher than Guston's usually brooding work of the 50s and early 60s. And Whisson is free enough. I perhaps should say, less stylized than Whisson, who does have a characteristic way with space, of breaking it down with what looks like a systematic and regular organization and distortion. Foubister seems freer than that, or is it just more eclectic? Am I saying stylization where I should say style? The work also reminded me (though much less so) of some English mid-century types (Nash? Ravillious?) which is the landscape connection: a similar kind of wonder before the subject of landmass,

and sky and light. I saw even Frankenthaler—for the balancing of tones. They were good paintings, if not in any way ‘latest thing’.

VISITATIONS, CLOSE ENCOUNTERS

The headline act at Greenaway was the Jenny Watson showing. *I woke up in France*—the title would seem to attach most closely to the ‘*French Made: French Maid*’ diptych featured on the exhibition invitation. Many of the works are similar exercises in this dreaming/fantasising/imagining mode. A constellation of pictures on one wall was made up of groups of three works, always small. Each consisted of a small hand-painted plaque stating the theme (‘I swam in the river’, ‘I patted an old cat’, ‘I walked by the river’, ‘I hunted for fabric’ are some approximations, from memory.) Each will be partnered by two other pictures: one, an image from Walt Disney (Snow White, Tinkerbell etc) printed with Japanese captions, bought cheaply at a market and hand coloured; and second, a painted vignette (a young woman seated on the balustrade of a bridge—the Seine? The Thames?—beside a taxi from which a young man has stepped to embrace her; a picture of a racing horse being beaten ‘by a nose’ by a flying bird; a horse and accompanying forlorn cat, a loopy-looking horse’s head. These were dream-like and funny or poignant.

Watson’s work often works a funny pathos. Funny bathos, I guess. The bathos derives from the inadequacy of the means (her resolutely outsiderish, naive style) relative to the seriousness, or profundity, of the ostensible meaning or content. (Love, Nature, consciousness, dream, ambition.) It derives, on another level, from the low tone of the means (cartoon, diagrammatic sketch or notation)—again, relative to the intent. It derives from the baldness or inadequacy of the subject matter relative to its intended metaphorical meaning; from the inadequacy of the procedures as rhetoric. So, multiple kinds of bathos vying for registration. The sophistication that enjoys these things and sees this (this trick, this reversal) as part of the ‘content’ and which discounts these inadequacies as at all ‘negative’, of course attributes the sophistication to the authoring painter.

The persona is innocent. If one thinks back to the early *Art and Text* days one might wonder would Paul Taylor, who championed Watson then, like the more recent work or excoriate it? In that work of the early to mid 80s Watson’s pictures often featured her heroine-artist-drinker-girl (and horse-lover) to raise all the themes that a corny but earnest idea of art would approve. (And we liked it!) It did this while working via the abbreviations and reductions and directness Watson’s style reduced the themes to. Themes of heroic narrative, of feminine/feminist journeying, of identity, reality and dream, emotion and modernity. Watson’s art of that time reduces these things to cliché or reveals them to be adequately treated, or signalled, as cliché or *by* cliché. Hence, probably, Taylor’s delight. The pictures worked a kind of

(deliberate) critical sharp practice. This left the viewer subject to a cross-current of dilemmas. The pictures' 'objectivity' was somehow Brechtian. An interesting, enlivening dilemma for the viewer.

The works might employ the ultimate guile of presenting as guileless—open-handed, innocent—and the pictures' beauty will usually hold one there before the work long enough for the pictures (for their proposal of innocence) to get under our guard. At least temporarily. The *'French Made: French Maid'* picture is pretty open comedy. There she stands, togged-out in the requisite short skirt, apron, mascara, lippy and eyelashes to 'do her thing': we see her from behind and as she surveys herself in the mirror. In both cases she has, comically, something of the gunfighter's stance—ready. It is openly a joke shared. The thoroughly beautiful *'Horse and Bird'*, on luscious striped red organza drapery was arresting in quite the way I mean. Doobier (a word for which I thank my sister), was the painting in heavily impasto cream smear, of a cow, its body in profile, face turned to us, barely able to stay ahead of and distinct from the closely valued, pale, patterned cloth it was painted on. The regular spots of the pattern were also where the jammy rose-magenta eyes of the cow, and its nostrils, were placed. Very funny. 'Cow'. Primary school art class results. But offered here for our delectation.

Jenny Watson's art is resistible—very dependent upon the currency of the conventional norms it rests against, leaning on them so rakishly and so casually, so that we smile. Is this dependency like omitting "something which you later rely upon in court", or like an argument relying on an unspoken premise? Granted, but many of us do smile (will smile), I among them. The norms Watson's work bounces off from reign still—though maybe her work's dependence on them makes it the norm's extension, rather than its replacement. If it go so does her work. Maybe. Maybe her work is a codicil. But this is the dependence of art upon art. Tradition and the individual talent.

I like Jenny Watson's work. This was far from a knockout blow from the artist, aesthetically—a small exhibition of some recent work, not at all a major assault—but I was glad to have seen it. Too Pop, too Pop-cute? I don't buy it.

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WHAT IS TO BE DONE?

The fate of that 90s generation is not an aesthetic issue: but it is one for the industry so-called. There are three art schools at least in Adelaide, and an art history course designed to produce curators in the main. But there is not the provision of support for the art world these institutions help to bring into being. The Adelaide gallery system cannot support new or innovative art adequately. And the critical reception the work is given is inadequately provided for: the few Adelaide publications that exist carry little or no

in-depth review. On this basis 'reputations' based on the press's mere acknowledgement of work shown diminish quickly. "Artists, head to Melbourne!" must be the lesson learnt. Sarah CrowEST, Vivienne Miller, Akira Akira, Shaun Kirby are cases in point. (Platten, Richard Grayson and Suzie Treister, Mark Siebert, have gone to London; Aldo Iacobelli attempts to maintain a presence in Spain and at home, though the Spanish market must now have contracted mightily.) The art market here is small—and 'the rich' would seem to prefer the blandishments of the Art Gallery of South Australia than to risk collecting—individually and unadvised—in a vacuum (a vacuum, where there should be a critically contested field as exciting as the art itself has sometimes been). (The Hugo Michell Gallery seems to have created a taste for a design-weighted and glib Pop, or Pop-cute. It is work that won't wear well, I predict. Though when have I ever predicted anything correctly? And currently it is selling, most of the artists being 'the real deal'—i.e., they come from out of town.)

It seems to me this is something ArtsSA must worry about. I am sure they do. Though is their budget big enough to do much about it? Is there the political will to back them? Federal funding makes only a little secret of their regarding Adelaide as a strictly regional centre. Meanwhile, and while posterity's good opinion can not be the main point, I suppose Louise Haselton can be sure of little purchase on the future? John Barbour's reputation—diminished by too long a time spent here (though it is here he did his good work)—might hang on, through the loyalty of some Sydney and Melbourne connections. Ditto George Popperwell. Ditto Nic Folland? And John Foubister, what are your chances, pal? These are awful calibrations to make. It is not the first time I have got this off my chest.