

## THE WOLF'S PYJAMAS

Artists: *CACSA Contemporary 2012: NEW South Australian Art*—various artists—CACSA at the DuPlessis Bldg, Adelaide August 1<sup>st</sup>—26<sup>th</sup>; Anna Platten—AGSA, August 3<sup>rd</sup>–Nov 18<sup>th</sup>; *Purpose-made Nothing-object*—Katie Barber—Odradek space at Australian Experimental Art Foundation, August 28<sup>th</sup>—September 9<sup>th</sup>; *Ordinary Beauty*—Stewart MacFarlane—Adelaide Central Gallery, September 1—29<sup>th</sup>.

by Ken Bolton

**Anna Platten's** art is celebrated at the AGSA in a show that runs during the SALA Week period and through to much later in the year. It occupies three rooms and gives space for a proper representation of her work. Her art is popular for its combination of sharp and exacting technique and a slightly sinister or spooky weirdness in its themes—where they are not simply pleasantly sentimental.

The technique is a kind of realism, tonal, I guess and has become very assured. There must be indicators of its being twentieth-century, but it can look quite eighteenth-century, or nineteenth and 'academic'. Some of the nicest paintings in the show are the earliest. These earliest paintings look a little contemporary—a function of their shallower conception and organisation of space and of their lighter colouring—before Platten's plunge into the gloom of the pre-Impressionist past. But not them alone: *The crossing* and *The gate* are so startling in the coup they work that their tactics are very much of today—some extended today—and *Tree of possibilities and concerns* also disposes objects in space in a slightly more fraught way and with a very sharp, anxious eye. Of course, what one might

call the works' Freudianism places most of it distinctly in the twentieth century at the least.

The oldest work in the exhibition is *Woman Painting Wardrobe*, of 1987. When first exhibited in the late 80s it represented a leap forward from work Anna Platten had been doing. Clearly it prefigured the path to come. Thematically Platten has been focused on identity from the very beginning. The painting shows the artist herself looking in a mirror and perhaps choosing clothes to wear. In the background an angel stands in a pool of sunlight, on one foot, examining the other, perhaps removing a splinter or thorn. Interrupted, the angel looks up from her business to cast a glance in our direction. The painting interestingly sets up a triangle of view points: the angel's, ours, the artist's. As the artist is looking in a mirror, she is able to see us: she knows we see her and the angel. (It is almost as if she asks, *Did you see that?*) It is a private moment we seem to have happened upon. The colours of the clothes (scarves and dresses), and of paint smeared on Platten's smock, are beautifully enlivening to an overall sombre colour scheme, a gift, like the vision of the angel-in-the-sun.

Identity in Platten's paintings seems always fraught: a matter of secrets, privacies, disclosures, shameful or sinister motives, and of masks, guises, veils, screens, curtains, roles and personas. Many a 'private' room or space is set up for us to view, to intrude upon almost. Many a curtain is pulled to give a revelation. Self-presentation is a regular activity and the paintings show figures declaring themselves, veiling themselves, framing themselves and eyeing the viewer equably or challengingly. The subjects' gazes acknowledge us, hold us, challenge us—or, vulnerably, seem to make a plea. There are minor regularities: an attention to shoes, for example, often appearing below tables or curtains, and in their not quite confident manner, undermining to some degree the figure who wears them. Or they will stand in slightly pointed relation to the figure's own self-presentation.

*Woman Painting Wardrobe* is small and jewel-like: keenly detailed. Yet it seems less smooth than her later work. Some of which is a little blandly happy to fill space with undifferentiated black or red. The result is a lot of square inches of not great visual interest and a rather airless and stiff final effect. See, say, *Woman and man with wolf mask*. This has the theatrical weirdness that links Platten to other of the original Adelaide Central School teachers. A chap approaches a bed: he is clothed in formal evening wear and with a wolf-mask in his hand, about to come between his face and that of the disporting woman on the bed. It recalls *Phantomas* and women tied to the rail tracks by plump, top-hatted villains—who want the rent or the satisfaction of their lusts. Think Vincent Price. Though the woman in this painting seems a co-conspirator. It is corn, whether done by Anna Platten or Adam Cullen. There are quite a number of paintings about which this could be said. They present as allegories, but this doesn't automatically lift the tone. Or maybe it is exactly the tone that it lifts, but not the concepts.

The staging of the identity issues is sometimes framed as in these morality-tale pictures. Platten's early work featured contemporary young women as models-in-the-studio and dressed as angels *for the artist*, typically surrounded by other unfinished paintings. So, these were much more propositional and conceptual, even if the concept is conventionally 'charming' and lite. They dealt with representation, self-representation, art and idea—arguably still the case with all or most of Platten's oeuvre, but the bulk of the work, in my view, too often plumps for belief in or simple amazement at the unworldly and the other. Admittedly *Sunlight*, a drawing showing two 12-year old (at a guess) angels—a little urchin-like, a little dishevelled—is very cute. It is beautifully done.

One piece (its title inventories the picture: *Woman, black cat, black hat and wonderchild in dreamland*) is given architectural extension—a bower built around it, with black-and-white chequered tile entrance that leads into the space of the

painting. It sets up some of the same triangulation of spaces and view points remarked earlier.

It is a Baroque division of space. The woman, the cat nearer us, the child with its head covered by a box or paper bag. The shadowed eyes of the mother recalled Rembrandt's treatment of the gazing figure, the eyes intensely interesting, but permanently not quite available to us, mysterious, reticent, private: the 'self' after all, subjectivity.

*The Waking Dream* seems to have some baroque source—Rembrandt's Danae figure captured as gold streams towards her, or is she Bathsheba at her bath?

One stand-out sequence is that given the group title *The 'On Foot' series*: each features a formally dressed woman with 19<sup>th</sup> century bustle and parasol on a hobby horse and posed with a wonderfully stark oddness in a rather empty rural terrain. The backgrounds seem detailed and yet to be drawn from European painting of the nineteenth century, if not from Goya or Velasquez, Murillo or some kindred figure. We recognise the backgrounds as 'from art' and conventional, though from an art that was seen as naturalistic in its own time. So, thus quoted, it comes across as laden with meaning, as sign. There are two pairs, one pair (*Landmark* and *Thunder*) has intensely blue sky behind the figure, the others (*The crossing* and *The gate*) have a brown, tan colouring and greater light and clarity, less shadow. These latter two paintings seem far the better two to me.

It is not clear what to make of these particular paintings. The oddness of the subject, together with the extraordinary clarity and fine detail of the painting, make them both curious and forthright. The image is given great staying power and aplomb. Platten has divulged that the figure is an adaptation from a medieval illustration representing a 'wandering soul', or *the* wandering (human) soul, and depicted with the appurtenances of the Fool. This explains the hobby-horse and

the little propeller on a stick—also the sole wayfarer’s locale, the isolation. The woman’s clothing seems punctiliously ‘correct’ and irreproachable (and high-toned) and her demeanour slightly haughty, or perhaps just ‘strong’. So the hobby-horse makes for a sudden surrealism: is it a witches-and-broomsticks fantasy that is hinted at? It lends the image a degree of tension around propriety and its disruption. But they finally settle as images that are talismanic, or emblematic—as if derived from some source like a tarot card: mysterious, non-negotiable; one close to full face, the other a strictly profile view. The blue pair seem more sweetly Barbizon and atmospheric, less weird really.

A double portrait—of a girl with a hoop and another up a ladder—is good. Again, the viewer finds him- or her-self regarded from two different quarters and the spaces are cleverly lit and isolated. One girl is framed by the hoop she holds, a light-coloured ring against black background. The other girl is more distant from us, high up a ladder. This girl glances at us with cursory curiosity, the older girl holds us knowingly in her gaze, conscious of being seen, conscious of holding all the cards.

Some of the drawings are technically remarkable: one or two at first seem like photographs. They are surely better for not being, the drawings have that superior selection and focus, nothing is extraneous. *Tree of possibilities and concerns* is one.

Platten’s self-portrait as the world’s tallest man is amusing. The *study for As I was going to St Ives*, coming complete with dragon, seems a little desperate: a visit back to the symbolism of Moreau and others. There is a wonderful portrait of a young blond boy and a nice one of a young girl triumphantly and happily atop a high wall. But many of the paintings seem to me too sub-Fellini vaudeville, though of course the theatre is foregrounded, deliberate. An attempt to have the cake of portentousness ... and eat it too? Or to have the cake, *and not let anyone*

*eat it*: after all, the dark and evil remain, always, conventionally represented but non-specific.

Overall, the show is equally weighted between kitsch and a striking and effectively mysterious confrontation with the personality: the teenage girl looking through the hoop at us, the figure in the unusual space of *Tree of possibilities* are two of the successes and some of the *On Foot* series, maybe *Puppets*, *Mirror with seated figure*. Many others seem hokum, or slightly sweet sentimentality.

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The Contemporary Art Centre of South Australia presented *New New* last year at about this time. For 2012 it has been scaled back to just *NEW* and has been in the same venue, the DuPlessis building on North Terrace. This time the show lacks the wow factor—very evanescent anyway—of vast numbers of artists and shows just a half dozen or so. Many of those shown last year were either not all that exciting or new, or not all that good even. So the excitement was not really warranted. But there *was* some terrific work in it. And there is this year.

**Christine Collins** has a sound installation (*I promise I won't sing*) that inhabits the overall space, rolling from the back of the exhibition area to the front. It is a selection of women's voices, chosen for the amount they sum up or distil from their roles in classic *film-noire* movies of mid twentieth-century Hollywood. The voices are brittle, a little breathless. They declare innocence, propriety, or they acknowledge—and seek to excuse—compromise: they insist, insinuate, implore, disclose very little, and seem reckless or, more often, frightened, strained. It is no surprise, but an eye-opener that they communicate these things so insistently and with such economy. And our recognition reminds us how recently their particular circumstances held for modern women and how well we know the code. The male protagonists actively sought victory or fulfilment and were actors

in life's drama: the women, by contrast, were secondary and punished for stepping into the world of appetite or ambition. Their behaviour was prescribed. (*I promise I won't sing* chimed, thematically, a little, with Anna Platten's themes.)

I suppose if fundamentalism comes back in a big way we might get *film noire* again. That'd be *something*, eh?

**Sam Howie** showed a large, very large, shaggily peeling and lumpy painting. The colouring was a kind of custard. It is an extension of what we have seen from him over the last year or more and it looked strong and confident and happily amusing in its space. It was mounted on the most evidently decrepit-looking of the DuPlessis building's old walls. These, like the painting, supported a great deal of peeling paint or wallpaper. Howie's picture seemed to revel in the slight confusion set up between itself and the space surrounding. The artist's statement has it that he is working at a kind of modernism but with a postmodern irony about the enterprise: both a faith and an unfaith: "metamodernism" is the term he has appropriated from the critics Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker. Maybe. It seems to fit as a description, though not in itself to propose a program or desiderata. True, though, Howie's paintings have intrigued on occasion—where they have seemed to enact late 60s and 70s 'advanced' painting with a deliberately woolly lack of rigour or uptightness—and, of course, to subtly make it wrong or different.

**Ariel Hassan** has a large picture, hanging, and billowing into the space: a vast magnification of what would seem to be a detail of pooling, multi-coloured oil paint. It was compelling, a function of its size, the immediacy of the expressively (or at least fascinatingly vertiginous) pooling paint and the fact of its reproduction in the *cool* medium of digital print—'cool' because its effect is usually to dampen emotion, urgency. (The piece was ink-jet on vinyl, a digital reproduction of one of Hassan's paintings, I *think* a detail, hung like a curtain on a wall-mounted steel

rod.) The work's bellying out into the gallery space (into, then, the viewer's space) had the effect of hyping its presence (a 'hottish' manoeuvre) and seeming a deliberate rhetorical ploy or gesture (something more 'cool', even cynical). Some of the ambiguity and irony that Hassan set up would ally the work perhaps with Sam Howie's metamodern.

**Amy Baker** showed two sculptures. One, seen early this year or late last at SASA Gallery, is very impressive. It has the presence of a tortured or struggling beast: a bull-like torso form in a writhing twist and mounted 'cruelly' on a stilt-like frame of thin wooden pieces. It looks low-tech and jerry-built; the body seems cardboard and to be held together with crudely applied tape. All this is deliberate, calculated and gives a strong effect: of urgency, of the provisional—of *meaning* created, more than 'perfect form'. And yet it is 'form' that produces this reading.

**Nasim Nasr** showed, as she did at the last *New New*, a filmic installation—in this instance a two-channel video—concerning the Middle East. It treats, on one hand, her native Iran as object of the current state of the Great Game wherein large outside interests (states and multinational companies) vie for petrol and resources, hegemony and dominance; and, on the other, it meditates on the construct 'Iran' and on its antecedent, 'Persia'—and on Persian/Iranian culture. The graphic means were very appropriate: an endless shifting of place names and mapped territory overlaying hands that threw coins, as in a game of chance, onto the fluidly shifting map. The projection came from directly above and fell upon two adjacent tables, of exactly the sort you might find in Australia, and perhaps anywhere, in an ethnic men's gambling club.

Both the coins used and the place names and territory shown remind on the one hand of Persia and the world order that held until WWI and the dismantling of the Ottoman empire—and, on the other, of the world since: of smaller, less stable nation states, of Iran rather than Persia. The imagery and the production were

effective: poetic, and with high (though unostentatious) production values. The pieces illustrate, perfectly adequately and justly, known states of affairs and presuppose (again, pretty correctly) audience feelings about them. They don't add a great deal to the debate. They can, though, be its best summation. This piece considers history, the different cultural resonances of the names "Persia" and "Iran", and must surely 'regret' the West, or view it with a great deal of ambivalence.

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**Katie Barber** showed a curious piece, *Purpose-made Nothing-object*, as the first, in what might be a series of three curious pieces, in the Odradek space at the AEF. The curator is Riley O'Keeffe and the concept holding the sequence of exhibitions together is that of the 'non-object'. It would seem to be a series of works attempting many negatives: the avoidance of easy categorisation or naming, escape from critical reception where that means 'receivership', the attainment of a state of objecthood of no identifiable kind. (To remain 'free'—'free', whatever that is: never argue with the movies!)

Barber's work seems to make a reasonable stab at this sur-nominal status. It appears to be a column of tiles rising flat against the Odradek wall. It did look satisfyingly unclassifiable as it awaited installation. And one nice effect of its calm oddness is that for a second the work seems to propose to the viewer that the viewer might themselves be upside down: the column runs up the Odradek wall and then towards the viewer when it continues across the Odradek's 'ceiling'. This extension seems like a 'base'—which the work doesn't have at its floor end—hence the proposition it urges, subliminally, briefly, of upendedness. It looks so right that it can't be upside down: maybe *we* can?

Anyway, that brief moment passes. And the normalising effect of the (tiny) gallery space—that the Odradek offers, or imposes—begins to lasso the work and wrangle it into compliance with our experience of art-works. It is hard to make a non-object in art when art has been testing any possible means of escaping that kind of categorisation for a great many decades—going back as far as, well, the sixties, if not to the Dadaists. The work Barber’s *Purpose-made Nothing-object* resembles most is that of Minimalists like Andre and Robert Morris, though like some of that era’s work it also evokes Brancusi’s *Endless Column*. Barber’s panels—or tiles—have a painted surface of delicately muted green and washy yellow that suggests a Japanese screen or the Japanoiserie screens produced around the end of the nineteenth century and early twentieth, by Bonnard or Vuillard, say. Though ‘screens’ is hardly what the columnar shape suggests. This ‘decorative’ charge pulls interestingly against the functional-looking (but functionless, in fact) reading the object also gives off. If it doesn’t look like it’s useful and it doesn’t look like anything, then maybe it’s (an) ‘Art’! Isn’t that what Henessy Youngman says? A recuperation. It’s the gravitational tug of the white cube pulling the non-object back into its field.

Remember Carl Andre’s famous *Lever*—a line of white bricks. The double-take Barber’s piece worked on me it may not work on every viewer, but it is a little like that which the Andre piece creates: the word “lever” proposes the line of bricks as a single, solid, rigid thing that can be moved, grabbed and lifted; our mind’s eye can entertain that, just—while our peepers deny it: the bricks will almost certainly not be joined, our eyes say, it is not a ‘lever’. Similarly Katie Barber’s *Purpose-made Nothing-object* proposes itself as a single ‘thing’? as a series of panels? as two-dimensional (the variegated and pretty surfaces, like mini paintings)? as solid, flat-ish, but *three*-dimensional? And so on. Perhaps you, viewer, don’t ask, Am I upside down, or is it upside down? Though I thought I for a nano-second got that giddy feeling. It is partly the result of having seen the

invitation image: there the piece is drawn, shown as developing idea, with its base on the floor of the Odradek. Clever.

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**Stewart MacFarlane** is showing *Ordinary Beauty* at Adelaide Central Gallery—“recent and retrospective work”—as the subtitle has it. A small show but very strong. MacFarlane’s work has been pretty recognisable since the mid-to-late 80s: the subjects are often slightly noirish, used often to suggest hard-boiled urban-myth and televisual (or ‘B-movie’) narrative situations; the lighting harsh, the figures heavily outlined, colour keyed up high. They also often find a kind of beauty—in their motel views, their conventionally pretty women and girls and in a suburban Everyday. The new works court complexity and dramatic energy much less. They are brighter, with clearer (and more sweet) colours and flatter application of paint, and they are more subtle and graceful in their compositional means.

The 80s are represented by one picture, but it is terrific. *The Metropol* is a large interior scene (225 x 330 cm) that, for me, recalls Al Leslie and (more so) Beckmann. In it people cavort wildly, some are passed out, one is an older male, one woman is nude and appears to be doing an erotic dance and to be lit as if on stage or in a cubicle at a pub. The verticals of the windows behind the scene, and the two poles either side of the dancing woman, organise the picture—or they lend *stability* against which all the furious diagonal energy (of limbs, gestures, folds in the central male’s shirt, sight-lines and the complex division of space) threatens and pushes. Sydney’s flatiron-styled Dental Hospital can be seen outside the windows, placing the scene, if you know, near Central Railway, maybe near Haymarket on the Oxford Street side. It looks seedy and exciting but not exactly immoral, though a voyeur figure peers in at them from the lower right of the painting—also figuring they are having a good time, probably.

*Popular Girls* shows three just-teenage girls, in nice weekend clothes, looking down on a dead African American man in a tuxedo. One of the girls has a gun. The affecting of modern anomie is a cliché, but MacFarlane offers it fairly knowingly and concentrates on the ‘beauty’ aspect: the painting has some wonderfully flowing lines leading across the picture at the top and down through the main girl’s (nerveless) arm and ‘gun hand’. The middle girl is carrying a large wooden-looking rabbit. Maybe she brained him with it? Maybe it just means ‘toy’ and asserts her youth. Of course it is amusingly incongruous and suggests both things. Along with sight-lines there are a lot of elbows urging our eye rightwards, but interesting in their own right—as everything is in MacFarlane’s paintings: here the thin-limbed beauty of the children. The colours are mostly cool, above a large area of orange carpet, with a cleverly used bright red to one side and the black of the evening wear bottom-middle and left. The heavy outlining is languid and amusing: it adequately describes figures while being amusingly off when considered: the wooden ‘legs’ of the middle girl, the impossible shoulder and arm of the girl nearest. The girls’ faces are beautifully captured. The viewer forgets the narrative subject, then comes back to it: a moebius strip.

There is a moodily ‘neutral’ city-scape (*Nightwatch*), as viewed from, probably, a motel window: it shows black, buildings, scattered windows alight, and some glow from more distant city—beneath, I think, undifferentiated night sky. It seems a real moment, almost sad at not generating more mood.

MacFarlane’s pictures are not unrelated to comic strip frames: they have that same clarity, same abbreviations and intensification, same minimum furnishing of detail, often. Though the detail that is there is for that reason telling. The equation they propose (of figures, of situation, the disposition of figures and space) is swiftly and firmly put, strongly imagined. The pictures are nearly always moments in time, episodes, and imply an immediate past or a coming action. True even of

many of the landscapes and views. These are not so simply something to view, but read as if establishing the mood and setting in a narrative film. *Nightwatch* was one such. In the new book devoted to him there are more: *Leaving Town*, *Succulent*, *The Last Resort*. Many host an abiding silence, as if prelude to what might happen.

The nudes are also intriguing—for the relaxed line, compositional balance and for the ambiguous relationships that the viewer inevitably attributes, considers, reconstrues: are these women bombed out of their minds, terribly sad, enslaved, merely a little down; are they up for it, pretty cheery and confident? It probably depends which pictures of MacFarlane's are surrounding them. But, that question aside, there is more going on. The construction and musculature of the human form is exaggerated, often hardened. It lends a slightly wolfish aspect to the male characters—both their bodies and their faces—and a look of strength to the female nudes, and a slight *ostranenei* to both: we see angles, juttings, ungainliness, sharpness, where we might conventionally expect the round and smooth. This is part of what makes the paintings so startlingly present, actual.

Some phases of his career seemed to play up the *Twin Peaks*-Death-at-Chappaquiddick content. (*En masse* these could be a little relentless. I definitely got tired of the women tied up before daytime TV, alone in a motel bedroom in their best nickers, unable to get to the bottle of scotch. This seemed mean narrative corn—too readable as genre—and often not as formally interesting as his work could be and (on the evidence of this exhibition) has increasingly become: they seemed too satisfied to shock or repel.)

The more current work with nudes has great presence, a kind of directness of address: both the picture's address to us and the artist's address to the compositional problem. The subject's are present as personalities and as mysteries—but these new pictures seem to *depend* much less on anything that

might be called literary or narrative. *Salome* and *That Old Feeling*, were two I liked: *Salome* is a big picture (183 x 152cm), in pink mostly, but with brown (Salome is Afro-American) and a pistachio green. She regards us calmly and confidently. *That Old Feeling* (97 x 122) is smaller, in blue and gold largely.

In the new *Stewart MacFarlane* book the artist speaks somewhere of liking “the beauty and the ugliness” of humans. And while the paintings are carnal enough it is the actual that they attend to, reconciling it with the formal problem they have set themselves. Both *Salome* and *That Old Feeling* are clearly exercises in working with one predominant colour, with a second colour as foil. The forms seem slightly solarised (*a la* Man Ray) and have a curiously nerveless, quasi-electric and smooth unreality to them. (“Would you call that ‘deliquescent’, Sarge?” “Yes, soldier, ‘deliquescent’”.) The eyes are unreadable: far away, pitying, pitiless, dry-eyed? The mood seems terribly *contemporary*. The same mood has—for four or five decades now. Not just in MacFarlane. We seem to find it attractive or mesmerising.

MacFarlane’s work has developed from an early fascination with Edward Hopper. It derives more virtue out of what were the slightly workmanlike faults of Hopper’s own technique. MacFarlane’s paintings are far more curious about the world, as well as being curious to look at. And the moods are much more various: Hopper ranges from melancholy to mild wistfulness.

And I find MacFarlane’s style far preferable to that of Eric Fischl. (There is some overlap in subject matter.)

MacFarlane’s pictures are warmer, or ‘closer’ to their human subjects, or more *able* to be.

There is more in the mix of course: the influence of Alex Katz is well assimilated. I suppose it urged the more serene formalism, the lighter colours.

Of course there are a lot of figurative painters out there and MacFarlane will have been paying attention. As he should. The book *Stewart MacFarlane—Paintings* has just been published (by Wei Ling Gallery, Malaysia). Very good production, with texts by Nicholas Jose, Timothy Morrell, and the artist. The work is grouped by theme, well selected, and there is a lot of it and—though the pictures in real life are better—it is terrific to look at. Howard Arkley one might suppose to be the local influence, but MacFarlane's oeuvre is far more vitalist and arresting, despite the kind of perfection Arkley's best work is often thought to have achieved. If MacFarlane took anything from him (as he should have if he could) the Arkley connection does not, for me, immediately spring to mind. MacFarlane's early study, in Adelaide, was with David Dridan and Dave Dallwitz.