

CRAIGE ANDRAE, TARNISHED ANGEL Profile—2002

by Ken Bolton

One of a series of notorious mini-interviews artworld jokers Rose Mount and Sam Tessoriero conducted with the art scene around Adelaide (none of them, unfortunately, published) has this brief meeting with Craige Andrae. Here it is in toto –

Rose & Sam: Craige, they say you're so laid back you're the Bing Crosby of the art world.

Craige Andrae: Bing Crosby?

Rose & Sam: The guy who sings at Xmas. You know, "I'm dreaming of a ..."

Craige Andrae: I know that. I'm maybe a bit more ... prankish, & hip?

Rose & Sam: Neo neo-dada?

Craige Andrae: 'Martin Kippenberger'?

Rose & Sam: ... Bing Kippenberger!

So imagine my surprise when I ring the bell of artist Craige Andrae's door only to have it answered by the artist, his hair just washed, and he dressed casually—what looks like a martini glass in hand and a golf club under one arm: the essence of Bing. There is something relaxed but functional about the Andrae aesthetic—unfazeable, too—that extends here even to his clothes—the artist's feet are shod in bright red runners, but otherwise the figure who greets me is in the casual, preppy, confident look of, well, a bygone era. The famous eyes are green—but paler than I imagined them. He extends a hand... etc. Is that how profiles go?

My idea of Craige Andrae's work centers on two solo exhibitions—and, fresher, the catalogue of his UK, Goldsmiths College work. Some of this last is now touring—and getting Andrae 'good press' as it does so—in the Stuart Koop-curated group show *Gulliver's Travels*. This last will be coming to Adelaide's CAC.

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Andrae whacks me on the back of the head with the golf club and for a moment I see stars. There's a question on my lips, but I never formulate it exactly. I pass out instead. I wake, and it is as if I am in 1989 again. I see a prominent early Andrae work from that year *We Were Deconstructing*: a giant circular buzz saw blade, of cheerfully pretty white polystyrene. It read as a take on the late 80s employment of the big, dumb, emphatic gesture—where scale was paramount and an 'explain-nothing' stance added to the work's transcending, unarguable untouchability. *We Were Deconstructing* seems born of admiration and incredulity at the technique's infallibility and its ubiquity. It was as if Andrae said, Is *everybody* going to do this? It was also partly a take on the many who were quickly ingesting high French Theory and producing—hey presto—*art-with-authority*.

Typically Andrae has dealt with languages, with codes of design and presentation. Early work showed an interest in perception and the physical constituents of viewing, of mere seeing and of recognition.

Consider 1992's, *page 52* (from the CAC exhibition *The Refrain*), employed 26 different sorts of glass jar—and, using these as 'letters', presented a page of Calvino's novel *If on a winter's night*, the jars set up like a giant letterset block of type—if you saw the resemblance. Otherwise it looked like a purely formal and tasteful display of white and light and glass on a grid. Did anyone exclaim, *Hey, I've read this somewhere before?* Andrae would have been surprised if they had.

These works demonstrate the degree to which, more than those around him, Andrae was rooted in the classic epistemological underpinnings of minimal, conceptual and installation art as developed in the USA and UK. It makes his art less continental in feel than Kirby's, for example. It is a lineage that makes his works, despite appearances, very solid. I think of Sol LeWitt's work which used to systematically generate a formal arrangement based on some (simple) idea—such as, say, a sequence of squares and boxes that might run: two dimensional outline, followed by three dimensional outline, followed by three dimensional solid, and so on. The work was 'conceptual' in that the form appeared to the viewer only as she/he grasped the idea. You saw what you understood.

Sol LeWitt's 'Sentences on Conceptual Art' includes the following:-

5. Irrational thoughts should be followed absolutely and logically.
6. If the artist changes his mind midway through the execution of the piece he compromises the result and repeats past results.
7. The artist's will is secondary to the process he initiates from idea to completion. His willfulness may only be ego.

Andrae's transposing of the 52nd page of Calvino's novel is a kindred impersonal obedience to idea—resulting in a form not 'compromised' by personal taste.

Page 52 had a truly singing, other, non-sentimental formality.

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As high production values increasingly came within Andrae's ambit or reach—as feasible, achievable—he has moved further away from them: to a rhetoric that is disarming, even as it quotes and parodies (and thereby analyses) some of the much more inflated rhetorics operating in contemporary art. More inflated, but less complex than his own which can casually comprehend them.

Andrae's work deals in the rhetorics of various manners of proposal in art and which structure art's overall self-proposal: *This is Art—this is important*, or the self-deprecatory *It's only me—a little bit of 'art'*. Both tactics Andrae's art views with some amusement.

The exhibition *Refrain* was accompanied by huge expectations. It was popular and yet difficult for the viewer then to get a handle on. His next, some years later at the EAF, worked very differently, 1997's *ALBUM – Various Artists*.

ALBUM was a virtuoso impersonation of a typical, ambitious group show—or a typical exhibit in a very modern state gallery—a *Perspecta* or Biennale or, in anticipation, a Tate Modern. It employed mostly objects of popular consumption—ready-made—and combined them to re-enact, mimic, the moves of modern and post-modern art—or, indeed, of 'the gallery'. Eager to demonstrate that it got the joke our own state gallery bought two.

The works returned to the 'big gesture' (signifier of large vision, of ambition, of summative and authoritative statement) and to the brazen. *Composition*, was a De Stijl-like version of a painting wherein coloured drink bottles stood in for the coloured rectangles that usually make up a Mondrian painting. A Shaun Kirby-esque tower of laminated wooden chairs formed a 'staircase' (successfully conjuring Duchamp's *Nude Descending...* title) and from the other side showed a fragile (read 'desperate') scaffolding—needed 'behind the scene' to hold it up. This alluded to a Kirby work that hadn't even been done—and now didn't need to be—but it suggested immediately 'Shaun Kirby'.

Two other pieces in *ALBUM I* particularly liked. One was a giant Calder-style mobile. Basically the usual Calder kind of hanging ... of designer label clothes: Armani jacket, expensive shirt, shoes, socks, on coathangers. It suggested super-rich Eurotrash and *Flash Art* magazine. The other piece was an enormous T-shirt or football guernsey (it was entitled *Guernsey*) that featured an equally huge A on the chest. An allusion to the 'A' team—of which Andrae and his peers were a part. Among them the term was anathema in public. Andrae's piece suggested 'the will to fame' - and the need to hide that ambition. *Guernsey* was partially hidden behind two giant cupboard doors, slightly ajar, two of the moveable walls of the EAF.

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Andrae's working life is spent on projects for others, often making the kinds of visual Major Statements he would never make himself—even less so, one suspects, after having made them for others: grand, seamlessly factured, totalising, dominating works that announce DEATH, BEING, VOID and all the rest, with plenty of rhetorical reverb. Objects perfectly constructed, costed according to grants, measured according to public art design specifications. It's an inoculation probably.

Where the *Various Artists* work reproduced the maximalist scale and manner of much then-current art, Andrae's mode since has been to work a kind of willed, abashed failure. It works *with*, but with telling distance *from*, the styles of 'the object'.

Actions, installations, and tiny, matchstick-man scenes, these are made 'for camera'. We view the filmed action, ignore the filming, view the scene but feel we're seeing the objects neutral. Viewing these same works *in situ* we are aware of choices made: as to the look, the calculated ineptitude of the protagonist matchstick pieces—and the discrepancies *between* that look and the scale, finish, and meanings of the gallery context. Here the production values are at least quasi photographic, or dramatic, filmic—a strategy of presentation that invokes the proscenium-arch, theatrical 'scene' and story-board maquettes.

The small scale is a mechanism of the joke but works, also, to exclude much of the visual context to the periphery. And that exclusion, that 'lets pretend', is itself presented: a (fragile) world within a world is presented.

It seems to me that Andrae's attitude serves to protect humour and intelligence. The work is not arch, and is not dependent on art protocols to make its sense. It is genuine thought, 'out of school'—though applied *to* that school—and is therefore immediately refreshing.

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Installation art—with its antecedents in Arte Povera or Minimalism and Conceptualism—is often posited as standing in opposition to 'the gallery'. Its dependence on that same space is routinely noted as, variously, a contradiction, an irony, or a vitiating factor. The rigorous white neutrality of the gallery space IS a kind of capitalization around the whole art enterprise. It speaks in advance for the seriousness of the art within. It is effectively the same reverential plinth, the same frame around the work as the impressive carved, sculpted, moulded frames around the paintings of the 18th and 19th centuries.

It is an effect contemporary art can shrug off—the hardest option. It can subvert or oppose it (easier because the game plan or structure of the opposition or denial is quite legible). Otherwise the art should live up to or earn the boost the institution gives it. Another hard option, though it is the traditional one. Very often, we might think, this last path is in fact a case of two very like discourses conspiring to support each other: *you say I'm important and I'll try to act like an instance of the importance you're suggesting.*

Andrae's work runs towards parodying this last situation —or moving towards the first—shrugging off the institutionalized reverence.

I don't wish to succumb here to the rhetoric that automatically celebrates works as (and for) 'irreverence'. A whole vocabulary is usually attendant on pronouncing the word: read "irreverent" and you can expect to see very soon "wry", "cheeky", "playful", "wicked" and the rest. If not individually then as a constellation they spell lightweight, facetious, trivial, old hat—basically *unserious*, in the sense where this last means that the artist (or the artist's whole oeuvre) has lost track of the main game or 'the issues'. Fair enough. When everybody praises something for being 'irreverent' you can be sure in most cases its target is something no one really involved is too reverent about.

Craige Andrae's moves, or tactics, are means towards clear-eyed thinking—of the sort art (should) perform or induce. Understand the work and for a moment at least there are certain 'attitudinal' mistakes you won't be able to make.

Generationally Craige Andrae is associated of course with specific artists. He was part of the so-called 'A' team of around 1990. As Adelaide artists they are of course more uniformly verbally orientated, more controlled, less wild and more complex than the equivalent range of artists from, say, Sydney or Brisbane.

It does occur to me that Andrae's very presence on the Adelaide scene is a part of the larger continuum—the scene here and its developing thinking—and that his relatively rare exhibitions are almost like interventions in the continuum. "Duchamp's silence is overrated," someone said—and I don't want too much to heroize Andrae's ... reserve? sloth? reticence?—but his exhibitions had something of the quality of demonstrations, a regular 'showing how its done'. It is time for another one.

Finally, there is the 'killingly' funny Masters Degree *Student Work* (his graduating exhibition's title) from Andrae's time at Goldsmiths in London. Among other things it features the matchstick men scenarios: so bathetic—and such brutally *minimalist/povera* redactions of Giacometti. Who'd have thought the latter's work could be made to look Baroque, richly, creamily rhetorical? Wasn't it proto-

minimalist, proto-*povera* itself? But its sense of its own insightfulness, its devotion to its air of existential tragedy, were too obtrusive to be anything but tiring. And Andrae goes to work on it.

These are parodies of student work and, through it, of the Serious Art aims that 'student work' so correctly identifies in the big adult art world that judges it. The remarks Andrae's work elicited from the teachers and assessors—many of them artists of 'reputation' in the UK—are very telling and very funny. Best yet, they were quoted in large, and unnervingly clear type on Andrae's catalogue. One imagines their private response *You're too smart to be doing student work—in fact, don't come to my own exhibition either.*

Here are all/a selection of these comments

Your not aiming too high here are you?—Jake Chapman

Am I missing something? I don't get it!—David Mabb

It's funny but it's all too easy craige.—Simon Linke

What if was to say that your work is cynical?—Mathew Higgs

So what—Suhail Malik

Remember its all in the detail—Gerard Hemsworth

So what your saying is that the work is validated by its context and its importance, to a greater or lesser degree, is determined by the authority commanded by the said context.—Nick de Ville

I don't usually suggest this but your work would benefit from being larger.—Monica Oechsler

There is nothing wrong with doing serious work.—Kate Smith

If people get hung up on specifics then that is their problem—
the intent is clear.—Rose Finn Kelcey

Like American Ray Johnson's art—tiny pictures regularly shown, like snapshots on a mantelpiece, on the steps of MoMA—the work can constitute something of a reproach to that of others. The suggestion that it should be bigger (“I don't usually say this, but -”) is a beauty—it wants the work to join in and become a commodity, a luxury item, saleable commercially. Andrae's humour, Andrae's work, is more serious. Not solemn, not portentous, but serious. Funny, pointed, amusing, snigger-inducing in fact, but absolutely serious. Without bothering to be important, necessarily. Without pretending to be, certainly.