

Some thinking about John Barbour's *Work For Now*

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by Ken Bolton

There is a passage in John Barbour's 'Stopped Clocks' that is one of the competing, or succeeding, focuses within the work. Much reproduced, it is hugely resonant—of Duchamp's 'Tu m' at first, but more truly of, say, Duchamp's 'Network of Stoppages', of Mario Merz's fixation on fibonacci sequences, of Mel Bochner's play with numbers and systematic numbering, of William Burrough's (and Nikki de Saint-Phalle's?) works composed by shooting. They might recall, too, the holes in George Popperwell's work 'Region'. These are resemblances or allusions that the work might be thought to revel in. The passage consists of two lines of numbers stemming from the same single zero and diverging or fanning out, bumpily, across the work's silk surface, across the shadowy staining of the material. 'Stopped Clocks' has the look of *arte povera*, of early conceptualism—the numbers look effortful and vaguely purposive, but *hazarded, mooted, proposed*—perhaps only to be contemplated in thinking that was anterior to the creation of 'art', or of 'the' art-work.

Up close we see the numbers are embroidered onto the cotton material and are a coarse black wool. It is at the far right, the 'end' maybe, of what is a long work, hung as a painting, made of loosely hanging white cotton voile.

The material is pinned, unstretched, to the wall, and drapes, flatly, but not entirely so. There are creases in a few places, the work can billow a little. A good amount of it, a quarter or a fifth, is unmarked, but generally the work is stained in cloudlike spills of greys and blacks: either sooty, smokey, or, conversely, watery. It is possible to take this as accidental, random-but-deliberate, or maybe assisted a little, set up, somehow controlled.

'Stopped Clocks' is extraordinarily beautiful, delicate in its gradations towards and away from an intense black and soft grey. Black ink in water is the look, or black ink applied thin to wet surfaces. Diaphanous, smokey, with some swirling or billowing. Ink under water, smoke. It also reads as resembling Chinese landscape painting, a quasi topographic depiction of mountain ranges. Some tiny flecks or spottings of colour activate the eye's experience of the piece. They are appreciably there, but only just so. They tend to make us see—or suspect or attribute—colour where it isn't. This too is pleasurable and is one of the factors that draws the viewer close to the work. Drawn close we are given up to the ravishing surface, its delicacy and riches made of poverty, made of accident, made of acceptance of what comes, of 'how things fall out'.

The mysticism of the number sequence fits this perfectly—if we read it as predictive (and predictable is what the sequence seems to be feeling its way towards), to do, at any rate, with fate and chance. The picturesque romance (if it is there at all) of the 'Chinese' landscape ridges is something, perhaps, of a slightly fond joke. Or it is at this stage, or at this end of the painting. Even so, *at* that earlier stage, or back in the centre and left of the painting, we had this experience (or have had another experience and another set of triggered associations) and won't disown it. However we feel about it now, it is part of our history with the painting, a history of seconds or minutes, moments. (Clearly my reading of these passages as akin to Chinese landscape is only a possible one.) I do think the work elicits provisional readings and responses and that one of its values is in these needing to be rescinded, modified, 'remembered', as we look.

The work also supports, briefly, a recognition of itself as 'object'. Which would link it with slightly earlier works of Barbour's. But 'Stopped Clocks' is too beautiful, pretty even. And it was never clear how much the category 'object' fitted Barbour's work at any time. Barbour was hostile to such a reading and it didn't do enough to give any very full account of the work. It is one more, though, of those visual resonances the piece makes at precisely late 2010, another art-resemblance or art consonance that the work can claim.

'Object' doesn't pertain much to the work, which does require of the viewer, though, some surrendering of logos in exchange for the associative reverie and

fascination. The work's literal quiddity means nothing while read as ordered and subordinated to meaning. But unconstrained, out from under any hierarchy, every material difference, every feature of the material has equal claim on the eye. Equal claim on the associating mind as well—though association, each kind of association, reconvenes the agendas of the mind, ours or those guessed to be imputable to the artist.

The issue of intention might hover here, though intentionality in many of these works remains unverifiable. Presumably, though not strictly verifiably, the maker's experience in the process of making parallels and resembles the viewer's own. Volition, we might feel, might not have been consistent throughout the process, but discovery and surprise might not have been all.

So we contemplate the mixture of acrid and the sweet, tobacco and lolly, topography and spill, and the strange numerical progressions which come with their intimation of a progression that can be worked out or which has been tentatively ventured by the artist.

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'No More Holes' shifts happily and less lingeringly between similarly dichotomous readings. Brevity is wit: the move from abstract to sense—or materiality to sense—is quick and more resounding each time. We read the sense or sense the material: read "no more holes" as it is spelled out on the white of the wall—or see instead the line of letter shapes as pure burnt, melted or torn metal complete with the 'holes' the letter 'o' emphatically makes at each appearance. There are holes.

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Two walls of the gallery's second room are given over to small groups of three or four, sometimes fewer, freestanding illustrations or cut-to-shape objects (a foot's sole in once case, slightly green-blue, photographic illustration from a magazine ad for tired feet maybe). These small object sequences read as dream-like charades staging a clue, or a constellation of them. There is something amusingly theatrical, arch and studied about them. The connections seem

irrational but underlying, like a Rousselian theme: they are forthright and enigmatic at the same time, dreamy. They lend a kind of whimsy to the show and remind that whimsy might lurk in other works here too. Some might be about the artist's dilemma or 'attitude': Barbour in 18th century salon savant's gear, for example, modern discomfitted head on top of the rationalist body, is one amusing image. Around him, also free-standing, on the same dais, is an ape, a seated, suited figure with a cloud for a head, and 'The Naked Maja'. The Barbour/boffin-buffo figure is depicted standing, foolish, on a small bench. The green foot (minus any big toe, I notice) stands beside a smaller picture of an open door: the doorway, though, is bricked in. Something about "a foot in the door"? and the difficulty of kicking brick down?. On one dais a lone Commedia dell' Arte type indicates with a rod or wand the daises further along the wall. The first of them has (photos of) bunches of flowers, posies etc, all free-standing. The next dais in line (also part of the rod-wielder's gift) features a small male figure looking puzzled or stymied before a curtained proscenium arch, near which lies an abandoned crutch twice his size. Then comes the foot, door and wall.

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A few works seem thrown in as pointers to the correctly sympathetic reading his works require. The simple magic of offering a waste paper bin and some scraps of furled paper (rotting food scraps?) all in the form of 'gold' seems a banal piece of editorial about magic: the transforming powers of art, the 'lowest' items offered as sustaining our interest and appreciation. The everyday, man—it's gold! Is this news to anyone? Bin and stray gold rubbish stand by the corner of a hung two-dimensional piece of stained and worked cotton where the form in the corner very much resembles the burnished aura of the gold bin, the same crumpled metal sheen. (I have been saying "gold": in fact the material is copper sheeting.) Pale pink stained colour features in the centre and right of this piece. To the painting's right, on another wall, hang two squares of silky, shiny pink silk. Two different pinks. On one is appliquéd a small, dully beige heart shape. (A lead, heart-shaped object is on a low pedestal at the opposite end of the gallery.)

Far right on the last wall hang a scatter of small clumps of variously coloured silk thread, each a pink, a green, a brown, a blue, a red, soft, pretty, a little like bits of Spanish moss. A bit like a Sarah CrowEST installation, though gauzier, more

diffuse. *Work For Now* is carefully laid out to harvest each piece's echo of another in the show. 'Dead Litter' names the gold garbage, its neighbouring hanging is 'Where the words go'. 'My Brother Pink', 'The Worm In The Silk' are the others in the sequence. (The leaden 'heart' is 'Untitled object'.)

I have a degree of resistance to some of Barbour's showings. Usually it is founded on a feeling that the work is not proposing very much and that it does not attempt to gain steerage, but floats with the tide, or 'a' tide. But this resistance is often something that the work dissolves: because it is so very much *about* abandon, abandonment to associations and to the materiality of the work's makeup and to its madeness and qualities of accident, of fortuitousness. The artist we might feel, 'happens' upon things in these works, things (tiny 'events', tropisms, synaptic events) happen to him, including chains of association and thought that are engendered but which are determinedly not chased down, nailed down to a conclusion. (This very lack of determination I at first react against: this is too easy, too easy to say Yes to, too hard to say No to without immediate guilt at one's hard, logocentric, Western self.) (The dilemma is not easily resolved—well, unless you are in the mood to declare quickly for one attitude rather than the other.) As regards this determination: the works are staged, presented, with all the deliberation necessary to make available these windfalls of dreaming bounty the artist has discovered. Their arrangement in the gallery and upon the wall is very careful. There is also a mordant, maybe rueful, maybe attenuatedly detached humour behind many of the pieces. (The artist has been here before, has wrestled for Team West in his own past.)

'No More Holes' is a case in point. It suggests, from a distance, the sort of holes burnt in paper—as when a lit cigarette is placed against a shirt or sheet or, indeed, a piece of paper—corrosive, burnt, oxidised. Closer to and it is plainly made of metal. (Though of metal that has all the charm and visual intensity of the burned and rusted, the torn and distressed.) The 'O' shapes loom larger than the other letters and form the readiest visual alliance or sequence. The smallest is filled in, solid, with the 'authority' of an ink blot. The other letters seem suspended in an amusingly weaker relationship vis a vis the 'O's — which they try to bring into their order by re-asserting their incorporation of the letters within their own linguistic chain. But the 'O's are only slightly reduced in their independence when

and as we read the sentence. The humour is loopily obvious—a sight-joke—but also somehow profound, tragic.

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I was amused to wonder if John Barbour ever thought, *Hey, just like Morris Louis and Helen Frankenthaler back in 1958 or the 60s, I'm staining materials!* Their example would have been regarded as anathema in Barbour's formative years. Barbour stains differently than Louis, to different purposes? But not so differently to Frankenthaler or (even) Jules Olitski—looking for the (new) picturesque and the retinally evanescent and ravishing? Barbour wants work to operate on more registers, I think.

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'Dilemma' was an amusing/interesting category or situation for John Barbour, I think, through much of his career. His work has seemed at times to portray it, or to win out against its terms (by flukily creating out of the shards of other, hidden or failed enterprises. Viz. the floor pieces made from studio offcuts. These always seemed to me to remind of a fleet after a naval battle: a myriad randomly dispersed rectangular shapes disappearing into the 'sea' surface of the gallery floor). At other times the work has clowned, to happily (or unhappily) stand indicted—Stuck again.

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I have been thinking that the melting away of our resistance to Barbour's work leads us to an 'eastern' aesthetic, to a 'feminine' aesthetic — in both senses an orientalism. Ditto the progression of Barbour's own work in this direction. Both terms I mean within scare quotes: Orientalism theorised the terms as the projection of the (patriarchal, puritan) West, a projection of weaknesses, of difference, upon its chosen Other. A can of worms, I know.

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There is less greyness of the spirit in this show — probably because it is no longer wrestling with the end-game of late Modernism that Minimalism was or is—the reduced options of “the cult of the direct and the difficult”, in Lucy Lippard’s formulation. John Barbour got around these by allowing much about the works (much about their register, their materials, their literalism?) to operate as signifiers if read allegorically, as existential gestures ‘before’ the void or before the void as represented by this limiting of options, this ‘reduced field’. This gave the works an un-American gravitas (no longer Frank Stella’s “What you see is what you get”)—continental, ‘Beckettian’, dark, darkly mirthful. And Protestant. And masculine. It is self-reflexive, endlessly self-ironising, yet impersonal because the work extends the situation to us as the, or a, ‘condition humaine’. (Of course, if the irony about the masculine nature of the dilemma is extended to the viewer then the viewer is presumed to be masculine. No self is genderless, of course.)

(But, no. Women see the irony of men getting themselves stuck for their own reasons every day. Not even, necessarily, with mere amusement. But Barbour’s work, in these instances, may assume fellow-feeling. Which of course it may get, from *either* sex.)

The gendered-ness of Barbour’s work is of interest partly because whole sequences of his work have been—and usually with an air of surprise—declared ‘feminine’, ‘gentle’ etcetera, and approved on that basis. While ‘gentle’ applies, and ‘feminine’ in inverted commas, it seems to me the work remains markedly masculine. This may be neither here nor there, is one attitude that can be held in regard to this. But it’s not mine. Another is, ‘No it’s not!’ But I don’t think either of these is the answer.

The quote attached to the *Work For Now* comes from the artist and itself ends with a quote from Rimbaud: “Generally I want the materials and processes to lead me somewhere I haven’t been (or even better, to lead me astray!). I want them to exist independently of my intentions. An artist always has intentions, but there is also the secret life things have in themselves. I want my works to speak to and about ‘my’ world, and in my register — but I also want them to have their own identities and destinies. I think of this as my ‘Republic of Things’. This mysterious dualism is beautifully expressed by poet Arthur Rimbaud’s words.

‘The bugle sleeps as brass’.” The Rimbaud quote is sourced to Ian North’s writing on Barbour.

I guess the artist is not praising his own work’s ‘mysterious dualism’ here so much as adverting to a mystery he sees the dualism generating more generally. And which he would have his works evoke or instance. I think that, though this might be weighted differently at different times, it is true of Barbour’s work over the reach of his oeuvre. It links most of the work I know as Barbour’s, like a trace of shared genetic data, but it is less central, less stand-alone till we meet the work of the last decade.

As a central desideratum ‘letting things be things’ raises a few issues critically. All things are equally ‘things’, for one thing, and are necessarily things, for another. But all things are not equal. Are the more dramatic, more ‘picturesque’ or singular things better? Better for art? Or worse? Some aesthetic might differentiate between them? But is making this differentiation aesthetically ethical? A like dilemma attaches to notions of chance—do you only use the chance results that look good? What of those that are too good, those that are too neutral, too odd? Arbitrating among chance results would seem to undermine the purpose.

I feel that I am beginning to write the same review, a review I have written before. (The critic’s dilemma.) The ‘picturesque’ figures as a problem, or a reproach, to Paul Hoban’s work. I’ve made similar observations of Paul Hoban’s practices. And the two artists have been paired in my imagining for some time. They are teaching colleagues but co-conspirators as well. I am pleased to wonder at the gravitational pull they might exert on each other, the encouragement they gain from each other.

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More than many other artist operating in Adelaide Barbour has often seemed not be exhibiting his wares so much as offering samples of his attitude, or exhibiting his ‘practice’. Partly this is an effect of his rarity as peculiarly and selfconsciously ‘deliberate’ an artist. Barbour has seemed deeply thought through, fully conscious of where his art stands, whence it is derived, what problems are thought to attach to its position or stance. And his brain is a biggun. And the

terrain or context in which he works—floating independent of Adelaide, situated in, say, an austere version of ‘Western art’—has seemed impressively ‘serious’ and ‘high culture’. A little intimidated, we have paid close attention, figuring we can learn something. As a teacher he has represented The Serious, I think, to many younger artists. So this might be an effect of these attitudes. (And maybe I am speaking entirely and only for myself.) Some of Barbour’s exhibitions have come across as showings of *Work-in-progress*. *If* it is the practice we are offered, the stance from which the work flows—rather than luxury goods for the trade, *a la* Cy Twombly, say—then reservations about the tenability of the thinking behind it are to the point.

Some history / some themes:

A contemplation of the horrors of modernity/‘modernism’: the hard, constrained places they put the artist in, the limited options they allow him for ‘play’.

Remember the humanist Kantian ‘at his stool’, shit on his finger? Remember the painting of a cartoon head in disco-decor colors (as I remember it), the head with a thought balloon: ‘I’m thinking’. At the time this seemed an hilarious invocation of the ‘conceptual’ artist’s role (and his pretence) and a joke about the pop band I’m Talking, possibly still in the charts at that time.

This last is reprised in *Work For Now* with the painting ‘Think’. The letters—non-serif, thin and black—fill the white painting, which is, here, hung on its side, ‘T’ being on the bottom and ‘K’ at the rectangle’s top edge. (In fact there are two canvases, but hung as one.) The thin black-and-white is echoed in the sculpture nearby: pieces of what might at first be taken for car parts (chassis, muffler etc). uniformly black, in a scatter against the pale grey floor and leaning against the white wall. Does ‘Think’ mock us? (Who isn’t thinking? And What’s to think about?) One is tempted to confirm that the floor-piece (‘Lost Routes To Lovely’) can or cannot be reconstituted to spell “THINK”. But it looks unlikely. They were made some time after the painting. But even so?

Ian North has noted “the dunces’ caps, execution references and portentous alter egos ... redolent with a pervasive, brutal existentialism of the past work” — “that has latterly given way to a lighter, less obvious poeticism.”

North also noted that the artist is now no longer John de Silencio or any other pseudonym, but present in his own character behind these works.

Ian North writes accurately about Barbour. He notes the work “teased from throwaway materials without apparent disguise, sublimation or attempted transcendence – the rag-picker’s recycling”. He makes reference to Beckett and *Krapp’s Last Tape*.

For Barbour, says North, the fundamental meaning of objects is a contradiction, for it lies in their very meaninglessness.

He registers the move to a more intimate, materially engaged practice, notes that its “humility of means” is part of its message. North quotes Barbour’s stated desideratum: “Make art with as little as possible, make art thru unmaking”.

John Barbour’s materials (lead, loose cotton, thread, base lead) and final effects (of poverty, of devolution, of the existential) suggest some family resemblance, some shared artistic DNA, with Eva Hesse, even Tracey Emin, with Anselm Kiefer, Joseph Beuys. Not always a matter of influence, not always the same motivations or sensibility.

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Just as Barbour has made art, on occasion, out of the off-cuts and by-products of studio activity it might be possible to see a large part of his output as the negative image of a central struggle. This invisible entity, I imagine, would be the late, Minimalist modernism and conceptualism Barbour (I am supposing) inherited, breathed, worked with as a young artist. The shape of the alternative is the postmodern: at first joking about the impossibility of the work in the one arena, then more positively harvesting the fruits of the alternative field. How things ‘fall out’. The republic of things.

Notes

Quotation and synopsis from Ian North come from his article 'Krapp's bugle: John Barbour and the art of the impossible' — *Art and Australia*, 47/3, 2010.

The proposal, the probably 'idle' proposal, that Barbour's work might be the positive or negative of some other set of procedures and artistic moves or solutions may be simply another error of my own. Arguing it would involve firstly a deal of clarification of my use of terms like Minimalism, modernism and postmodern—and *then* the admission of grey areas, the noting of achieved works that fall in the area John is thought not to reject—and works seemingly of both camps, or of 'either' camp. And then ...