

## WEIRD OR WHAT?—TO GO BO DIDDLEY

“To go, Bo Diddley,  
where no man has gone before!”

— Captain Kirk

Christian Lock—*New Painting*—and Chelsea Lehmann—*Mise en Scene*—  
Greenaway Gallery—October 19—November 13, 2011; Gary Carsley—  
*gardenesque* and Heidi Abraham—*there is no god but god*—Contemporary Arts  
Centre of South Australia, November 4—December 11, 2011; OSW (Bianca  
Hester, Terri Bird, Scott Mitchell)—*BIG LOG JAM*—Australian Experimental Art  
Foundation—November 24—December 17, 2011.

by Ken Bolton

### Cool

Christian Lock is an odd artist to write about: one can write descriptively of the paintings, but they do not invite any effort to view them under the eye of ‘art history’. Lock would seem not to be interested in any teleology. They are pictures to look at—and be intrigued by, soothed by, piqued by. They do not buy into arguments about art’s direction or directions, about any ‘necessities’ that follow from those things.

Lock’s recent showing at Greenaway is of work that is characteristic enough and different enough. Lock is reliably inventive. A new phase of his work typically deals with variations on a (new) image, shape, or treatment. A while back there was a series of—as I remember them—chalkily x-ray-like pictures featuring

single, shell-like shapes, that resembled primitive life forms of some sort. Bivalves? And others that were more akin to floral forms. They were beautiful on a number of counts: for their (metaphorical) fragility and intricacy, for their ghostliness, and as descriptions—though were they descriptive of anything *precisely*? Curiosities on the drawing board ... from the past, from the future, from Nature?

The current exhibition has a new shape to deal with: vaguely triangular, but vaguely organic in appearance, too: from one painting to the next it can resemble, a little, a heart, a slightly twisted bike seat, a pair of underbriefs—think ‘knickers’ if you want that thrill—or melted computer parts—or lilies, or hearing implants. But of course they resemble none of these very closely. They are ambivalently and ambiguously spacey. Cool colours on soft black grounds, or on greyly atmospheric backgrounds. They are painted with precision and softened, usually, by a degree of haloing cloud about them. The overall space can read as depth or as fairly shallow. They will support such readings without encouraging them, verifying them, too much. Unsupported in this way, we come to think of them as of a shape or shapes ‘in space’, but only that space that new technology, science fiction, design *et al*/ dream of—limitless but unexplored, basically a niche (like an invisible pedestal) for the honorifically ‘new’ to float in, free of care or earthly pressures: like dirt, wear etc. And free of scale, too.

(This last remarked characteristic—the picture’s space as ‘pedestal’ or as velvet cushion—signals a weakness that has pertained to some of Lock’s paintings. They can tend to be fairly plainly centered around delivering a single, arresting image that does not relate strongly to the rest of the canvas. It rankles against some sorts of modernist sensitivity, though not one that has reigned since the waning of Greenberg. It can, where the image does not sweep all before it, seem a little uncomplicated, lazy or easy and unsustaining. But this is hardly the case with this current set of paintings: a few rested securely on the strength of a

principal image and otherwise there was quite enough going on between the various shapes and their contrasting styles: precise, fuzzy, representational, 'expressive', three-dimensional and so on might all feature in a single painting.)

There were globs of paint, 'real' globs, sometimes a centimetre thick, on, I think, all the pictures. This was the three-dimensional element. And these elements set off the short-circuit our eyes can describe in gauging—and attempting to rationalize—depth, recession. These globs of course are well to the fore, and are actual rather than depiction. (Yes, yes, I know—what is depicted exactly in a Lock painting?—a 'thing'.) *To the fore*, but usually small—so that their discretion has them not seen at first, or seen and forgotten—and then they cough or clear their throat and remind us that they are 'there', throwing the eye's calibrations of depth into a kind of exciting disarray. These pieces of 'matter' were mostly very small, but coloured so as to contrast with the overall colour scheme of the host painting. A few were also smeared: making them, at-the-same-time, both surfacey and three-dimensional.

The aesthetic shares something with that of late Kandinsky and that of hi-tech car advertisements (and what else—new shaving technology, some kinds of packaging for men's grooming products). There is the same love (or fetishizing in the advertisements) of the smoothly machined and moulded corners, the seeming precision of 'design' and high technology, the sheen of grey and black—a mysticism, in short, a love of the trance of enchantment. Christian Lock's paintings often intone a kind of 'Ommm', as they invite us to dream about disembodiment, *2001*, HAL and the perfect wave. Well, they can be beautiful. (Lock's works mostly had a few straight, 'geometrical' lines in them, long and thin—the 'Kandinsky' presence—counterposed against the substantive but shimmering central object.)

So, a kind of beauty. It is interesting that Lock's paintings release you, too, without any of that 'bitter breakup' feel—of boredom—with which we sever ourselves from many other paintings. This is a positive, though I think it derives from their not being 'about' anything really: the loss of attention is gradual, not irksome.

Is beauty the whole point? A sufficient point? (Recall here the many paintings of single, luscious hues that Lock has shown in the past, the roses, the soft blues.) These are the questions Christian Lock's work can beg, even if you find them desirable. Their defence must rest in that beauty taking on some value.

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Also at Greenaway was Chelsea Lehmann. I liked Lehmann's small pictures—all of them redolent of and sentimental about a mostly pre-modernist art: Fragonard and the rococo (the warm and painterly rococo of artists' working studies rather than the finished works, of rococo seen through later glasses of... Sickert? early Manet, Matisse, Rouault?), tonalist painting's struggle with impressionism and postimpressionism. Are these of the contemporary world, are they for it, or an escape? The drawings, the technique of the drawings, might have more purchase available to them than the more backward-looking paintings. The portraits, too, had more steel to them. (There were portraits both painted and drawn.) Lehmann might be an artist to watch. The works were all in very small, even 'novelty' formats. Despite the example of, say, Elizabeth Peyton, this is probably not the way to go.

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**Lite n Gritty**

Gary Carsley's *gardenesque* employs the three rooms of the CACSA gallery, presenting a different development (of its imagery, procedures, themes) in each. The visitor meets first the vestibular room of CACSA. Here the floor is laid with fake wood linoleum, the walls papered in the exhibition's all-surrounding Chinese Garden imagery. A small table with chairs and tea-set occupies some of the space, but invites the viewer to participate more experientially—to 'stop reading the codes', at least stop reading them so exclusively as art—and to enjoy the experience. The 'experience', of course, is *artificial* though it is of an immersive, all-surrounding representation of 'Nature'. Artificial nature. This registers, correctly, as a paradox, despite wallpaper, shower-curtains etc having looked like this for quite some time. No, probably not *your* wallpaper. The wallpaper in rest-homes and motel foyers.

The second room employs the same imagery but features flat-pack assemblies and flat-pack *assembled* human-scaled boxes that are also lined with the same wallpaper. These, within a room already, can themselves be imagined as further interiors, enclosing one potentially in 'Nature'. Nature in a box.

This is all well done, but, fatally, the show is bringing very old news. Any self-respecting member of the chattering classes has been in on the increasingly sad irony: that sanitised replications, samplings and simulacra of 'nature' are offered to us increasingly as the thing itself is destroyed and removed from our lives, and that Nature is, yes, a concept, one freighted with ideas, ideology, world views. Carsley's work, I *think*, has its eye arched and signals that its tongue is in its cheek. But it is not alerting us to anything new, there is no discovery.

The joke seems no longer the point to make, no longer to be of any use: whom does it disabuse within an arts audience? The imagery is Asian. Is there a (new) point to make, against or about Japanese or Chinese attitudes? As opposed to

ours? The special dreaminess of this particular aesthetic is routinely noted by westerners. But then ours probably registers with Asian eyes, too. As we know. And, as I say, these ironies have a history of a few decades at the very least—so we are quite capable of recognising our own nationally favoured clichés—as clichéd, and as ‘ours’: they are ubiquitous in advertising, travelogues etc.

*Gardenesque* has missed its time to such a degree that it is hard to determine what it meant to be: pointedly deathly in a late 80s/early 90s way, about empty simulacra, or ironic about the delights of artifice and artificiality in the manner of late Pop. I thought at first that *gardenesque* offered to amuse as a totalising packaging of experience—deliberately failing, but amusingly so, as a commodification of nature, that its ‘too artificial’ sweetness is meant to be amusing, amusingly cloying. But it may be that it is meant to be amusingly pretty, amusingly ‘lite’. While intentions are neither here nor there—they are indicated, I think, in the catalogue essay, which purports to be a walk-through response to the show and reassures the artist (and the reader) that the installation is “fun” and “cool”.

As an experience to ‘simply’ enjoy *gardenesque* was a bit silly. Lighten up? How lite can you get? (Is this the Titanic? Can I come on board? Will it be fun?)

The third room brought the Australian bush—registered in the same high, pale green, pale yellow key—into would-be dramatic and telling conflict with classical sculpture. Each scene had at its centre a black silhouette, of a god, goddess, or hero. Pallas Athene, Jupiter, Apollo, Mars, I would guess, and Minerva and Aphrodite. Interesting, I suppose, how strongly and immediately their shapes proclaimed ‘Greece’, ‘Rome’—and how ‘opposed’ they seemed to the Australian landscape. Or maybe to *a normative conception of ‘the Australian landscape’*. No reading seems especially indicated: *we are as out of place here as those gods*

*and goddesses?* That might have been it? That would be the current dutifully correct response.

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Heidi Abraham's *there is no god but god* showed in the slightly under-powered CACSA Project Space, where artists can languish, aura leaching from their work. To a large degree Abraham's art met the challenge. The artist had a well made catalogue going into bat for her, as well. By Adam Geczy, it had the standard, rather weird misunderstanding of prepositions that complicates his formulations, but, on top of that, a lack of proofing to further distance sense. Still, the huffing and puffing indicated that Geczy was going to run a defence on the basis of the artist's general orientation and topic area. Viz, an unchallengeable Middle Eastern—specifically, Egyptian—background before which all criticism should quail, and the application of this perspective to current unrest, long-standing hegemonic inequalities between East and West, and to kinds of cultural confidence, certainty and belief.

Abraham's exhibition was not strongly propositional. It dealt partly in offering for examination cultural certainties that then crumbled, or faded quickly, as their declarative certainty echoed tinnily about them. These certainties were those of both East and West. 'East and West', as a too-simple binary, might have been among the certainties or entities that her relativism and irony served to test, and caused to tremble.

The elements that made up the exhibition were a film—a looped excerpt from what looked like a 70s military-adventure film, *The Bullet is still in my Pocket*, set in the middle east and middle-eastern itself. (The catalogue informs us that it concerned the Arab-Israeli wars of 1967 and '73—the original film, then, may have been more serious than I took it to be, the bullet signalling readiness always

to defend.) On the wall near the monitor were the words “Happy birthday, Mr President”. Abraham, I think, was likely sarcastic about the original phrase’s own intended sarcasm. (Usually it is uttered with heavy sarcasm towards a president who will never really pay for his sins: so it points to the speaker’s distance from power, its futility to some degree reaffirms hierarchy.) Maybe not: it was well known in Egypt as Mubarak’s favourite film, regularly viewed. Abraham likely sees both sides. The derring-do of the film seemed unconvincing; the series of messes perpetrated in the Middle East by Britain, the US, France and others, stretching back to the fall of the Ottoman empire, dwarfs the more local struggle. Considering the removal of Iran’s oil-nationalising socialist government and the installation of the Shah, for example, right up to the more recent deals and motivations of the Bush years, the long support of Mubarak, and others, as stable and pro-Western, the convenient accommodations with Gaddafi and Saddam Hussein: these perspectives rendered the film’s bravado sadly comic or merely sad—and the unreality is extended to the film’s adversaries and equally to the West’s policies and actions.

That such readings attach readily, as if easily available, doesn’t lessen them. It does, though, mean that the film cites the nexus, the knot of issues and that that is enough. We do not look at it for long: the work is less memorable than its readings. A political success; maybe not an artistic one.

Abraham also exhibited some single goldfish, in bowls, with Australian tourist imagery behind them. The imagery of Sydney harbour on the one hand and floating goldfish on the other threw both into curious relief. The fish’s fragile exoticism could transfer easily to the Sydney behind it: Sydney, or by extension ‘Australia’, could seem a rather unlikely proposition—against the prospect of climate change, population movements and the rest.

Three air-conditioning ducts, stuffed with paper, were mounted on one wall. They look slightly better photographed (see the catalogue) than they did *in-situ*. Though maybe between the two exhibitions—Abraham’s and Carsley’s—I had developed a taste for the artificial. These ducts, sealed as they were, suggested insulation, insularity, isolation, siege, secrecy—and despair, because one took them to be sign of an unremitting, last-resort bunkering against an awful situation, and the foreclosing of hospitality, openness and so on. They were genuinely glum, sad, ‘negative’—and memorable. Unlike the other parts of the exhibition they had formal weight where the other elements depended upon obvious binaries (exotic versus familiar, the film’s illusion versus an overpowering context) and via them adverted too immediately to idea.

### **(Art and Text)**

“Let Newman write my epitaph”  
— Jerry Seinfeld

The exhibition looked a little bald in the Project Space, but this may have been entirely deliberate. Geczy—writing, possibly, without a clear idea of what Abraham’s show was going to look like—leapt from topic to topic in the catalogue. He favours, often, letting the reader in on secrets and little known facts: one was that the work of Jacques Louis David’s most associated with the French Revolution after the fact, was ‘Brutus’; another was that ‘Abraham’ was the English traduction of ‘Ibrahim’. Apart from *What?*, what about *Why?* I think ‘Ibrahim’ is spelled a few ways even in semitic languages and representing the vowels varies a good deal over time and place. ‘Abraham’ is European, not just English. (The French call London *Londres*. How about that—one in the eye for Anglophone hegemony, or is it French perfidy?) Apart from the portraits and those later works celebrating Napoleon, *most* of David’s paintings are associated with the Revolution or the lead-up to it. ‘Brutus’? Really, *not* ‘The Death of Marat’,

or 'The Oath of the Horatii', or 'The Tennis Court Oath'? But 'The Lictors Bring to Brutus the Bodies of His Sons' *is* a candidate, yes; and it allowed ambivalence, or taking sides—more than the 'Oath' painting did. But what was Geczy's *point vis a vis* Heidi Abraham? Ah, that like David she might have anticipated events. Even caused them, though I doubt Geczy believes the latter, even of David's painting. On the linguistic issue, well, Geczy is alerting us to the muddied waters of identity and especially 'hyphenated' multicultural identities. Heidi Abraham is Egyptian-Australian. Granted the complexity, though there seems no clear way through—*everyone* is likely more complicated than the label they are seen under at any one time. But you'd want to be. Heidi Abraham didn't seem to me to be declaring herself on this issue.

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*BIG LOG JAM* at the Australian Experimental Art Foundation (November 24—December 17, 2011), extends OSW's recent project BIG LOG. OSW (Open Spatial Workshop) consists of Bianca Hester, Terri Bird and Scott Mitchell. The workshop had initially been open to and included others but as this trio's ideas began to mesh and exfoliate they have not needed or been so easily able to accommodate other artist-members: they've been on a roll. The project develops—to quote the publicity—from a reconfiguring and re-contextualising of the group's own archive and a 'diagram of relations'.

One of the areas they have been investigating—or mapping—has to do with materiality and gravity (including things produced under zero gravity, such as the crystalline structures found harboured in meteorites—much larger than the same substances formed on earth). The exhibition was a performing/performative installation: some large objects made the gallery size seem more confined and room-like than ordinarily: large white gallery room, a bean bag of quadruple dimensions, a 'dream-catcher' about the length of a small car hung from the

ceiling, a pale pink ovoid disc hung similarly, a model of a specific meteorite (a Henbury meteorite), hung, too, a metallic gold 'planet', other objects. A machine fired tennis balls across the gallery, its aim playing across a goodly range, spinning the dream-catcher slowly, causing the bean bag to burp and shiver on impact and the ovoid shape to spin, too, and suggesting meteorites, atoms or electrons, paths of deflection etc. Beyond "suggestion", it actually demonstrates the effects of impacts, has its own durational time independent of the viewer (things have obviously 'gone on' before one's arrival and at intervals they recommence). Even stasis, in this context, speaks of the long stretches of geological time.

Pleasing without conveying a great deal of new information, the work is interesting for its transposition of some ideas and their relationships into a spatial field in which large, goofy or intriguingly retro and sciency objects (the asteroid, a metallic-gold ball, the 'ballistics meets rocket-science' gun firing its tennis balls, the giant green leatherette ball, boulder or planet) all figure as symbols, emblems, or allegorised players. The whole ensemble might be reasonably taken as the representation of a field of enquiry and to imply like representations of other, contiguous such fields. A map or genealogical chart of the collective's previous areas of research indicates what some of these are. They have included the following: space-time-materiality, economics, sci-fi, gravity, orientation, sense perception, language. From discussions within the group they have then focused these workshops into events which have been made public at clubs and in art spaces. *BIG LOG JAM* at the AEF is one such. It may be that clubs might be the ideal venue, more so than galleries—though the physical space of the AEF gallery does come interestingly alive when 'peopled' with the large, brightly animated shapes of this exhibition—and the opening night was sufficiently like a club experience, where a slightly comedic and spatially intriguing science experiment or demonstration takes place.

*BIG LOG JAM* stands at a curious distance from the conceptualism of the 60s and from the forms of Italian Arte Povera. It draws impetus from both movements. OSW's overarching project and much of its modus operandi—discussion, hands-on interplay, and research and testing, its lack of attachment to any particular medium, its orientation towards thought and science—bears witness to the conceptualist inheritance, even where it is parodic. *BIG LOG JAM*'s forms suggested Arte Povera, Lucio Fontana: viz the slightly tawdry but beautiful ovoid pink disk hanging from the ceiling. It suggested both the decor and aesthetic of a teenage girl's bedroom mirror and dressing-table and sugared almonds, hairbrushes and mirrors; the giant green ball was playful and innocent; the shooting mechanism was delightfully 'amateur' yet adequate, like a Dalek.

So, conceptualism for form's sake?

Of course, it could be argued that the whole ongoing project that is OSW instances with each show a representation of a field of knowledge, and of hypothesis and intuition, and that their sum builds to a large synthesis, impressively holding many fields in a spectacular relation. This supervening entity is the real work. Refer to the map.