

13.5.14

“Untimely Meditatin’” – Bakunin

Artists:

Collaborator—Aleksandra Antic, Anjo Bolardo, Rommel Joson, Glenn Kestell, Tristram Miravalles, Mark Valenzuela—Boxplot, April 25th — May 11th; Zoe Kirkwood—*Enter Excess: Space Invaders* and Sam Songailo—*Digital Wasteland*—CACSA, April 25th —May 24th; (*The exhibition formerly known as*) *Aspy Kids*—Celeste Aldahn, David Capra, Sarah CrowEST, Robin Hungerford, Amanda Marburg, Tom Polo, Mish Meijers and Tricky Walsh, Patrick Rees—AEAF, April 11th—May 17th; *Dark Heart*—various artists—AGSA, March 1st—May 11th.

by Ken Bolton

How provoking?

‘Aspy Kids’—as (*The exhibition formerly known as*) *Aspy Kids* is known—had some winning works in it, some less surely so, and a few that left me untouched or stymied uninterestingly. But it was worth seeing, worth staging. The exhibition took its title from a work by **Amanda Marburg** (included in the show), a painting of those words as formed in plasticene or coloured play-putty, mounted on a standard issue, unframed canvas. The letters were childishly formed and the painting was expertly done, so that, though flat, they seemed modeled and three-dimensional. Not a major feat

of illusionism, but the style was way more than simply adequate—and in any case the work's point was simply to capture something of the innocence of... the putative kids, of the casual and cruel descriptor “aspy”, or, equally, of the affectionate tone it might have carried, for who knows? In some respects the exhibition might have been about such labeling and its limitations. Nervousness about using the phrase as an exhibition title led to the expanded ‘formerly-known-as’ moniker. In fact the exhibition assembled a number of artists and works which all, variously, dealt in styles and procedures that suggested ineptitude, courted-failure, difficulty in proceeding... or recourse to a direct (and perhaps expressive) naïve or untutored style.

Taking a *long* perspective—the sort which would allow one to see David Shrigley, for example, as an heir of Expressionism (in the manner of Kirchner, say), an heir of Dubuffet's *Art Brut*—and of Warhol and Basquiat; and to see Sarah CrowEST connecting to Louise Bourgeois, Oldenburg and *Fluxus*—gathered thus, then the 'Aspy Kids' group might have seemed a further set of variations on *the theme, tactic or ploy*—of primitivism: a search for a more direct style, a style-less style, an innocent style, a vernacular style, a sly and wise low style, having arrived by various routes, and with varying levels of investment, *at that style as, expressive, efficacious, contemporary, genuine and so on.* But the artists were in fact both much less various than this—and less definingly connected to any idea of expression or formal outrage. So no need for that perspective.

Individually the works worked, or didn't. But I don't feel the exhibition as curated entity was able to explore or interrogate the tactic or gambit that the Aspy Kids' style or styles evidenced. For one thing it was never very sure that one was comparing like with like in this regard—whether these

works were responses to any shared 'problem' faced by artists, or that they were made in relation to a theme or subject shared by all.

Was the enacting of difficulty, their effortfulness, offered as proposition, admission, cry for help?

Uncertainty about this might suggest a problem in the works, most if not all of them. It was a problem for the meaning of the show, if not for the artists individually.

Marburg's painting '*Aspy Kids*' was the 'poster-work' for the show, but two grander statements were the winners for me: David Capra's video of performance-with-grand soundtrack and What's enormous painting '*Helen's Leg*' (6.6 metres long and a metre and a half tall). Marburg's piece had lost a little of its impact through use in the exhibition's media publicity, I think. A temporary effect. And there was not uninteresting work by others: Robin Hungerford, Tom Polo, and duo Mish Meijers and Tricky Walsh.

(The artist-known-as) **What's** painting '*Helen's Leg*' played the size factor for what it was worth, but the long leg it depicted was also admirably painted, in pale, shaley greys and putty colours that seemed very nineteenth-century French, against a black ground. (French? I suppose I am thinking of Corot—although the painting could resemble him in no other way. Maybe inter-war Derain?) The painted leg was solidly lumpy, not exactly realistic (which would have been boring: too 'slow' as a visual experience, too *slowing*) and amusingly forthright: unequivocally ambiguous. As the leg was truncated at the upper end it could read as dismembered. It was certainly not a leg that was about to flex or bend: it could have been cold mutton. I was caused to think of the psychological

condition which has people regard one of their own limbs as alien, hostile, unwanted: Body Integrity Identity Disorder. At the same time the gentle colours could read as calmly loving, solicitous. Stretching as it did for much of the length of the larger room in the AEF gallery its scale carried great impact, the upper profile was sharp and slightly landscape in feel, like a desert mountain range on another planet or the moon, or the peak of a dune. And it looked blade sharp.

David Capra's work has been seen a lot of late, taking prizes here and there. Are they becoming formulaic? In any case *'Birthing Things in the Spirit: The Water Birth'*, a video running about twenty minutes, is amusing and uplifting—at the same time as being openly 'would-be uplifting' and parodic: so the viewer is placed at a little distance from a simple response. It is operatic, grandiose, amateur, twee and kitsch, 'innocent' and Fellini-esque. In it Capra's own figure, dressed in head-to-toe satiny white, organizes a spectacle around himself in which we see him 'achieve' an apotheosis for himself with some well-over over-fifties swimmers in a giant indoor pool. It is Esther Williams or Busby Berkeley-style water ballet. Capra has of necessity to act the buffoon and throws himself into the role. The aesthetic is very iced-vovo, Rococo and Cinecitta, devoted to corny but touchingly amusing symmetries (and small 'failures' of symmetry). Too conspicuously 'touching' to touch one? For some viewers, Yes, I think. I liked it.

Tom Polo showed a selection from an ongoing series of paintings he has made—all on irregular-shaped and -sized canvases—of what might be described as failing or self-hindering apothegms, admonition, slogans, mottoes, statements of attitude: "winning not whining" says one. Letters are typically squeezed to fit the space left them, or are dropped to the next

line, thus breaking the word in a parody of ineptitude that undermines their intent. Or they are misspelled. “Ineffective Communication” scarcely fits into its space. “self-sabbotage” is another, and “self confidens” with its final, wrong letter alone under the rest of the word. The slogans or assertions—cheery, or doomed—would wish to project certainty, and of course they fail. It’s an easy trick, and it’s not unlike the work of many others. But still. And some were, at the same time, visually pleasing. I liked one that was entirely illegible, five pink clouds of colour—letter-shapes probably painted too thick and subsequently filled-in—against a blue background.

Another video on a loop, **Robin Hungerford**’s *‘Like a whole in the head’*—yes, the deliberate error was a gag here too—I took at first for a Sarah CrowEST work: a figure with large papier-mache head attempts, alarmingly, to relieve some unguessable frustration by repeatedly stabbing holes in its head, endeavouring to get at the source of pain or confusion. It seems driven, both methodical and uncontrollable.

Other works in the show I was less taken with, though I did like the **Meijers-Walsh** shopping trolley (surrounded by a kind of mess, as if it were an assortment of things gradually losing cohesion, being scattered, broken up, broken down, or discarded as of no use). Among other items, it possessed a small compass (the arm of which was dragged by a magnet circling above): it could never find ‘true north’, a sign of its ‘lost’ quality. The constellation of objects and patched-up gizmos looked amusingly innocent and forlorn. These satellite pieces also looked like ‘projects’ or ‘activities’ of the central Mothership shopping trolley: under one cantilevered box there were things growing, incubated—another had a (clownish) human head with a pencil nose, that seemed up for something, some activity to fail at—

the others were also 'purposive-looking' unlikely gizmos. Maybe the work begged to be anthropomorphised, read 'allegorically' as a person, an entity? The title though was '*goon-buggy/pisswars*'.

Sarah CrowEST's piece seemed to me a little too mute. It was intended, I think, to demonstrate (or to instance) the break-down of a systematic attempt at 'discipline' in expression and format, in look and style, in 'content' even. Which might mean that it needed to be seen as part of a series, so that exactly what was breaking down could be gauged. As CrowEST's is the next exhibition at the AEF this might become clear. In *Aspy Kids* it was not.

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Collaborator—showing at the Boxplot Gallery space in Brompton—was a good exhibition, of works on the wall—paintings, drawings—and one piece of sculpture: a group show of artists who had been paired and partnered so as to influence each other: three Philippine artists and three others—Australian Aleksandra Antic with Rommel Johnson (Philippines), Mark Valenzuela (now Australian) with Tristram Miravalles of the Philippines, and Glenn Kestell with Anjo Bolarda (Philippines). The Philippine artists—and Mark Valenzuela, who is from there as well—dealt with their country and its history of paternal rule and hierarchy: under the Spanish, under the Catholic Church, under the Americans and international capital, and under—briefly—the Japanese. **Tristram Miravalles** showed a pair of paintings indicting Catholicism's ethos of stoicism, resignation, quasi sadomasochistic sublimation: two subjects, one labeled *Saint*, the other *Sinner*, with clouds of suffering about them (clouds with thorns depending from them) bodies dedicated via tattoos to suffering Jesus or doleful Mary,

the skin of each subject sheened in sweat, the eyes consigned to pain, lips, eyelids, nipples a painful but beautiful rose—as though pain were beauty, as though suffering earned salvation. It was pretty much on the money as a diagnosis and technically very well painted.

Mark Valenzuela ‘answered’ these with a fine drawing that showed allegorically successive eras of domination—again the world of international corporate power, the preceding Spanish rule with its austere authoritarianism, its rigid Catholicism, and suggestions of war and devastation, of remnant or minority populations weathering these phases. The manner was surrealist, giving mystery, and the iconography had an agit-prop clarity that breathed life into whole.

Rommel Joson showed three takes on the various overlords the Philippines has g-had—the iconography not unlike Valenzuela’s but the allegorical mode more vernacular and populist. The style could almost have been Central or South American—the same mix of low, ‘folk’ manner, the same simple ordering of symbols. **Aleksandra Antic**’s more abstract ink drawings had a heavy, European darkness—which seemed to propose a more absolute or metaphysical angst or sorrow, but its process (the repeated writing, scrubbing down and overwriting of words and letters) implied the theme of difficulty of expression, difficulty of translation, from a mother tongue to a new language: loss, imprecision, division. **Anjo Bolarda** used what looked like a manga-styled cartooning—done with great energy and verve, terrific, subtle colour highlighting the energetic graphic manner. Against this **Glenn Kestell** offered Central School alienation—in the manner of Chris Orchard or Rob Taylor, but fairly effective: headless, suited figures, in slightly claustrophobic rooms and ambiguous spaces: in charcoal on paper they were forceful and firm,

strong work. It is a rhetoric drawn from Magritte, de Chirico and the Central School masters (and perhaps Jeffrey Smart?), that was tired quite a few decades ago. In my view it is still a cliché, but was here powerfully delivered. (Soullessness, conformity, cowardice seemed to be the charge—as, um, usual.)

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Two nicely complementary exhibitions at the CACSA galleries were those by **Sam Songailo** in the main gallery (*Digital Wasteland*) and Zoe Kirkwood (*Enter Excess: Space Invaders*) in the Project Space. Both were very 'Op'. Beginning in Adelaide, but now rather long gone, Sangailo has been operating thus for a number of years now, and always with éclat, and with a command grown probably more and more ambitious as his budgets and experience increase.

Songailo has, maybe more extensively than I have seen before, or just in a more complex way, covered walls and ceiling in the first gallery room, and in the second and also, in the final room, combined this with moving-image projection. Who needed sound? It felt like a 'total work' and was absorbing because so much of one's sensory system was claimed by it: the viewer measured his or her own progress within the space by the changing relationships of Songailo's signature stripes as one moved; one's balance felt slightly affected, and you were very aware of how your own vision was functioning—where optical, illusionary effects were occurring, how the cones and rods (almost) of your eye were holding up and then yielding to the inevitable victory of Songailo's colours and shifting compositional relationships. It was mesmerizing, slightly controlling, and exhilarating. It might have been headache-inducing, too, if the smell of the paint didn't

drive one from the gallery before that could come about. This didn't matter: it is probably designed to be viewed in bursts—and there's no 'content' to hang about, pondering. It is an experience—and it's immersive, as they say—a distant development of Albers and Vasarely and Riley and others (Noland, late Stella, Ellsworth Kelly, late Sol LeWitt): there are more than enough in the background that Sangailo might or might not relate to.

With artists like this I do wonder how they conceive of themselves—as event masters, craftsmen, like specialists in firework displays, say? They will be of their time only in the kinds of (usually arcane) technology they used and the kinds of aesthetic effects that were deemed of interest to their time. In other regards they will scarcely reflect anything of the politics or social facts of their era, nor have any effect on them.

Zoe Kirkwood's *Enter Excess: Space Invaders* was a sculptural installation with some graphic support around the room. It cohered well and managed to 'own' the difficult Project Space. Coloured shapes of wood or plastic—glossily painted in pinks and blues and lemon yellows—shaped in a Jetsons-art-deco, futuristic style (a retro future that has never arrived and never will, and which makes us smile fondly)—these ascended and descended on lines that ran up to the ceiling: a series of pulleys. They seemed to constitute a small city of towers and busy lifts, a techno utopia redolent of boiled-lolly candy and children's wooden toys, and an imaginary high tech. There were coloured works on the walls as well: a few looking like Kenneth Noland's concentric circle, 'target' pictures: in Kirkwood's range of colours

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There were a number of things to like in *Dark Heart*, the Art Gallery of South Australia's Adelaide Festival-period exhibition. At various points through the exhibition there hung large masses like buffalo's heads, like sea creatures or massive seaweed growths—all in a matte black material that looked like rubber (rubber, rope and leather). Menacing, and very 'Other', like a wasp's nest, or a mastodon. Each manifestation was different—partly because of the setting, the light that—however it varied—the work absorbed into itself. This series—by **Dani Marti**—was called 'Armour'. Some of them did have an ominous, helmeted Genghis Khan aura to them. Is that why?

Dark Heart occupied two levels. One walked down the stairs and came upon **Del Kathryn Barton**'s large painting '*the heartland*'. It is painted in a very striking manner—brilliantly coloured with many pale reds and greens close together. (Its themes were partly those of cell structures and bloodstream and nervous systems, animal and vegetal.) There was a good deal of white preserved around colours. Much of the painting employed the dot technique associated with indigenous art and to similar vibrant effect. My own first thought was (the word) "Viennese". The work suggested the era of Klimt and other symbolist, jugendstil painters—Jan Toorop (though he was Belgian or Dutch), even Schiele (the central portrait, though the technique employed did not allow for the same *kind* of subtlety as his portraits possess, had something of his intensity). At the same time—and the Viennese aesthetic, indeed this is true of much of the Symbolist era's production—it was also very 'teenage', in its ideas of drama and its aesthetic. ("Like doodles in the margins of a girl teen's secret lock-up diary," one friend remarked.) The work had a number of scenes either side, with organisms seemingly feeding off the central figure—which could read as espaliered, 'crucified', or as simply to be

'holding-up-half-the-sky' as she supported life systems interconnected with her own. The central face looked earnestly at one, a little confrontingly. To say, "I did this, could you?"? (Always one of my favourite questions.) Or simply to say, severely, "You watch it." The face is reproduced a number of times painted at different angles and at least on one occasion, reminded me for a minute of Pru Goward. So, an intelligent, *alert* face, with iron in the soul, up for the challenge. The work was very evenly elaborated and I guess, 'allegorical', serious though decorative—more a mural than an easel painting, having nothing to do with late modernism. This was re-powered early modernism sailing under the permission of the post-modern. A bit portentous and full of would-be religiosity. I don't know that it did mean a lot, but it 'stood its ground'.

Not far away was an exhibit—a whole room to itself, deservedly and necessarily—by **Julia deVille**. '*Phantasmagoria*' featured many dressed-up animals—dressed in very fine, slightly funky (was it the artist formally known as Prince's aesthetic?) costume clothing, often very rakish, restoration-era, or 'Cavalier'. Or was it Victorian and funerary, but with extra, stylish flourishes? Pearly, vitrified, in lace, velvet and glass, small animals rode, slept, were surprised or surprising. The clothing gave them a status that they seemed to wield, impose. A saddled rabbit, a roguish toad, a mouse, a plumed cat dragging a small hearse-with-coffin, another cat laid out as in death (a '*Victorian Cat Mummy*'). The furniture was appropriately fine-wrought and it too suggested 'period'.

DeVille isolated a 'Victorian' sentimentality, but care for the animals underlay the anthropomorphism—perhaps the willed, fantasy anthropomorphism was the means towards the caring. (The catalogue reveals that the room was a 'self-portrait'.)

DeVille was interesting because the intricate and very feminine costuming of the animals, in lace and pearls and little hats, costumes that looked highly theatrical, buccaneering and Restoration-era, or alternatively, Dickensian—(for the most part partial costuming)—drew the eye to close examination of the animals, and thence to a kind of imaginative empathy with them. Aside from a crow or two, and a horse's head, all of these were 'small': rodents, frogs, mice, kittens, some birds of varying sizes—small finches and sparrows or robins to crows. A similar empathetic operation worked in Fiona Hall's showing.

A second level to the exhibit was that one was (or *felt one was*) always involved in taking on a sensibility and mind-set *that was not one's own*. It was 'available', yes—it was out there in the ether—and it seemed, as well, 'historical', 'Victorian' as I have said. One was both identifying with and keeping an eye *on* this sensibility: but *one provided it oneself*—the works were only the occasion that elicited it. And, as a friend said, "Very Tim Burton"—an objection to the faux-Gothic sentimentality.

Ben Quilty's big rorschach-blot tropical island was interesting, if not quite interesting enough. The information panel alerted us to the 'fact' (?) that it "referenced" surf culture. If you couldn't see how were you to take this on trust? Maybe it didn't reference it, or not successfully. But the fact of rorschach blots' being associated with old-fashioned psycho-analysis—and (thereby) with the revelation of (in the curator's word) "dark" truths, dark patterns, or dark urges—*was being asked to do a lot of work*. I couldn't see that the painting was effectively indicating any of these dark things beyond the associated fact that the word "island" might remind us of our isolationist and racist policies towards immigrants and asylum seekers. I mean,

“enough said”, right? I suppose the chattering classes have the right to assume that art will be about whatever television tells them they should be thinking. The catalogue elaborates further on the work’s intended meaning, confident that this *is* its achieved or conveyed meaning.

Dale Frank’s paintings looked good and looked pretty much as his paintings have looked for a while—though these ones were mostly fairly (literally) dark, part of their figurative darkness. Their humour as always seemed sly. Saving him from coming over as an artist who’d had the effrontery to show a room full of mere paintings, these were hung around the top of the stairwell, so that one had a problem with viewing distance: far away made them seem a lot of dramatic shapes within their rectangular formats. Looked at close to, as you circled the stairs, the viewer was pressed up closer, closer to the myriad interesting details of the paint and the gravitational work that had formed the paintings: they were poured and variously manipulated to have the paint flow in different ways, the unmixed colours combining interestingly. I don’t think they were at all disadvantaged in this hanging, it was a good move.

Frank’s paintings were a darkly glamorous group. He knows how to get a good glower going, at other distances they were rather suave, though the viewer remembers that initial impression. There is a slightly Duchampian distance between the work and the artist, between artist and viewer in Frank’s works: *vis a vis* meaning, involvement, even effort. We can not gauge the degree of control Frank has over the paint, the effects of which are often very intricate or ‘fine’ in detail and dramatic on a larger scale compositionally and in terms of colour. Frank’s involvement must on occasion mirror the viewer’s: fascination with the properties of the paint as

it runs and pours, as the separate colours mix, separate out, or retain very precarious individuality, pinks and blacks not mixing, the black remaining veined with lines of pink, say, tenuous, vestigial, fragile. Artist and viewer involvement may—undecideably— coincide, mirror each other: but their respective investment? Probably never.

There is humour in this—which we can like—and part of the joke is in the game being set up so that Dale Frank, as the Dealer or Bank, has the cards, can see them, and we can't. Interpretation is the viewer's inclination but has to be checked. At any rate, it is not 'authorized'. As the shapes and forms—larger compositional forms and effects, and local detail—they will bear our responses, support them, but we bring them to the painting—which will have suckered you, if you fell for it. Why resist? Exactly. Frank must have achieved a high degree of predictive control—broadly—over his materials, mixed colours poured and manipulated to flow quickly or slowly with numerous interventions in its progress across or down a canvas. Sombre, light, cheery, pleasing will be set up well in advance: a matter of which paint pots are opened. This suite was predestined to be 'dark' in the 'dark heart' sense. The unfathomable nature of Dale Frank's exact involvement, expressively, is the trigger that has his work so often called sardonic, his remoteness seen as Mephistophelean, a sarcasm, manipulative and why his work is applauded in these terms as much as it is queried, doubted, denied. I always look forward to encountering Frank's work.

The format is that of Abstract Expressionism and Lyrical Abstraction, though this is an openly worn sheep's clothing, token disguise—or a spurious, disingenuous invitation to read under the aegis of those styles, from which Dale Frank is at a considerable and cool distance.. Aspects of

the current pictures suggested geographical time: thin lines like layered shale or stone; or they read as isometric index of heights and valleys, weather, a mapping of ridges, coastlines, land systems. Bushfires seen from the air. A mapping of dark territory. And of course the paintings are happy for the conflation of evil, fate, tragedy with the beautiful. It is completely available, therefore inevitable. Perhaps our knowingness—presented to us as a poisoned chalice—is the meaning.

Caroline Rothwell presented a room of black hangings and some free-standing pieces, the overall title 'Climatic'. 'Breathe' and 'Cascade' stood against the white ground of the walls—to show themselves as picture-like: rectangle of black with material cut out of it so that the black 'lines' and silhouettes remaining were seen to be graphic representations of a range of items, all of them more or less appropriate to each other: oil rigs, fighter-bombers, windmills (or fans?), battle ship, a dirigible (?), antennae: that is, industry, warfare, mineral research and despoliation. Or such was my reading. The black material looked entirely right: a petrochemical product of some sort: PVC, synthetic, and looking unpleasant to the touch, messy and not very biodegradable, and it hung and drooped unpleasantly.

Ian Burns' towering work, 'Clouds'. Big, but null. Not much happening. The information panel told the viewer that "Some of these words were influenced by Modernist poets, including Wallace Stevens." (I know: the words were influenced?) But there were only a very few words, that I could make out. Was it important that they were derived from un-named modernist poets, or from the one named, Wallace Stevens? How? Did it make the work more estimable? And so on.

Fiona Hall showed a room (*'Out Of My Tree'*), darkened, in which were some towers of blackened books with cheap vitrines and tiny bottled skulls enclosed within them. The skull theme dominated the room. Some skulls were immediately apparent, some became apparent as one wandered. Some were perfunctory, some more considered. Most were jocular, in the ghoulish-ghost story vein. The comedy was double-edged of course: the snuff movie would star us in all likelihood. Around the walls were small pieces of driftwood, and tree and branch, perhaps bone: all of these resembled animals: the head of a bird, or lizard, pig or snake, and so on. These were interesting in a number of ways. For one thing, it was unusual to see a major artist risk being seen as 'amateur'. But the chief virtue of these was that they so closely resembled (what one felt were) *particular* (rather than generalized) animals and in very particular attitudes and specific, natural poses. And the very close examination this compelled meant a degree of empathy with each animal. All of these seemed slightly ghostly—for the most part friendly ghosts: animals that were or might soon be extinct as we work our way to a lonely planet. Hall's Ghost Train exhibit proposed: As the animals die can we be far behind?

Brook Andrew has been making interesting art for quite some time. In *Dark Heart* he had a Gold room: darkened, with large vertical panels, formatted about the same throughout I think, hanging at regular, decorative intervals around the room. The scenes reproduced on each were European accounts of the mid-19th century—depicting early European visions, or envisionings, of the indigenous people and their customs. These originals were not major art, and it's not sure how much is observation and how much is benign fantasy. Andrew here gives them the scale of History Painting.

These panels (entitled '*Australia*' and numbered I—VI) were in a kind of gold. As used here, it was intimated, gold was thought to place value on this history, to raise its value, testify to its value. It looked good—as I imagine an Edwardian, or 1920s club-room might look, in a very 'Aesthetic Movement' sort of way—rich and suave and opulent. A pity that some of the images were very hard to discern thus treated. Not always strongly graphic in their original form, in reflective gold they lost further contrast. Or was this a point being made, about the loss of information, the distance from the actual, when information was transferred and transformed—the move from one convention to another introducing discrepancies, especially moves between cultures?

It strikes me that, in any case, this signaling of raised status by gilding was rather token—not a very marked stylistic intervention, involving not very much conceptual 'heavy lifting'. The move to gold 'be-tokens' this valuation. It is appropriate, but hardly decisive, merely conventional. There was a lot of *betokening* in *Dark Heart*. As a procedure or aesthetic 'move' it has of necessity to signify, or alert to, the already known: so, No Real News. It strikes me as a slightly twee procedure—and 'wet', like Victorian funerary conventions, like Charades, like ...

Betokening was the mechanism behind—the only mechanism operative in—**Alex Seton**'s carved and polished marble life-jackets. Like, barf me with a spoon. I was morally outraged! And there they were, 'appropriately', laid out before old Quilty's island. It sort of lent Quilty's work content it didn't quite have, while depending on the latter's work to suggest 'water', and thence make the white shapes readily intelligible as life-jackets. This betokening means the art will, 'of necessity' again, always be adverting to stances, positions, themes that the audience can be expected to quickly

recognize and side with. I'm against the illegal detention of asylum-seekers, too, surprise-surprise. But the art seemed mawkish and too easy—and irritating. Goody-two-shoes.

Brendan Huntley's heads I liked. A rum bunch. But I was not sure that maybe it was gratitude for their not being in a grotto, moodily lit and looking for all the world 'allegorical'. What, they were? Each might have ben a wildly quick swipe at a likeness: there was always a detail that seemed tellingly plausible, as reportage, as caricature-accuracy: they might not resemble anyone, but at the same time they might very easily evoke particular people very tellingly and with humour and sympathy.

Richard Lewer's moving-image, story-boarded graphic tale '*Worse luck ... I am still here*' seemed to me unexceptionable: good if not world-shaking, with a sympathetic theme. I suppose given permission by—rather than derivative of—William Kentridge. It seems reasonable that others would follow Kentridge, who might himself be considered part of a wider graphic-novel aesthetic.

Much about *Dark Heart* struck me as childish, or infantilizing. I suppose the gallery's position is that it is neither. After all, it's only me. But is it?

Very many of the artists, perhaps most, were presented in some variation on The River Caves/Ghost Train/tableau-vivant/diorama format. As well, the moving-image pieces shared a lot with the sensibility and (betokening) aesthetic of the music video clip. In the gallery's discourse the works were

often spoken of, I think, as allegorical—but it was always an allegory that translated quickly, readily and unsurprisingly.

“Allegory” once sounded European and ‘heavy, dude, heavy’. Think Susan Sontag, Canetti, or at least Borges; think Paul de Man, Harold Bloom, Walter Benjamin. Here and now it is a flat-lining of the quick debasement ‘installation’ underwent from its days in the 60s and 70s, where it came out of end-game late modernism: the argy-bargy between formalism and the conceptual and post-object movements. It tended to be literal, rather than allegoric. By the 80s it was depressingly regularly ‘theatrical’ (in the too obvious sense that Michael Fried had never meant. His objections would have been overridden, barely noted, by these developments, along with those of his avant-garde opponents). The implied proscenium archway was often very much present. Rubicons have been crossed in the entropic decline from Morris, Andre, Hesse, LeWitt, Smithson ... to the lay-down misère of current show-and-tell style presentation with its coy symmetries and conventionality and baby-language vernacular. One thinks of the Stones song, ‘Dumbing Down Again’.

AGSA has gone in for “heart” in a big way: first *Heartland* and now *Dark Heart*. Are they aiming to duck the brain, do you think? And *whose* heart, anyway, the gallery’s? No, it’s us, isn’t it? And “dark” anyway seems like an appeal identical to TV’s regular offering of ‘the dark’ (the ‘adult’ etc) in its dramas. We know the promotional voice-over (deep, deep, with a very dark bass note behind or beneath) and the other cliché of spiritual classical music to alert us to transcendent cruelty and imminent danger, the presence of the psychopath). Was *Dark Heart* dark, and not so much banal, or empty, or ... cornball?

The information panels were amusing: they regularly told us what to think and feel and how successful the work was. “This moving work etc etc”. The artist “imbues the landscape with”... One’s response soon becomes a suspicious or contemptuous “Say who?” or “Maybe for you, pal.” Perhaps AGSA can’t imagine a counter-suggestible punter? Maybe they think such opposition psychically acknowledges and reinforces their status as authority, power, and further renders the deeds as *faits accomplis*? Hard to know, isn’t it? I would venture that the artists must be embarrassed. Or are they, too, pleased to view the public as not their equals?

Was the art so bad? Or am I reacting too much to the presentation, the stagey eclat and drum-rolling, the presentation of wonders? If it’s my problem I’ll get over it, I guess. If it is the gallery’s I wish they’d fix it.

Hmm. What does one want of a State Gallery? Dullness? They are a monument to our regard for Art—a response that says, *Well, at least we should preserve it, some of it.* And the basement is testimony to the accuracy of their taste or judgement. Given that they acquire the authority that goes with that role—despite the basement—*should they be a player in contemporary art*, which should be regarded as volatile, hard to pronounce upon? Well, yes and no. There are reasons for each answer.

Real art—I know, “real art”, isn’t that begging an issue, tendentious to a fault?—should be judged, received first, in a space that doesn’t—and needn’t—confer the authority of ‘having arrived’. It should not be for State Galleries. The coming Dorrit Black show is their province. And I hope and expect it will be good. I suppose I’d rather these places were boring than irritating. But what a thought. Need they be either? The contemporary

could be confined to 'project shows', like recent showings of Ian North, for example—exhibitions which propose a re-evaluation, a re-acquaintance, or propose candidature: *maybe-this-is-great*, sort of thing. Or which look at some grouping of artists, around connections of theme, style, process. These seem the gallery's responsibility. Often AGSA seems to be offering spectacle *instead* of art to its audience, an audience that is getting a dubious education. Asking AGSA to *be boring again, we preferred it*, is not likely to succeed. (And would we be happy anyway?) The pact with government probably involves bums-on-seats as its measure. I give in, maybe boring was no better than childish—why prefer it?