

Distemper

Artists: *Endless Summer*—various artists—at Nexus Gallery, 5 April 5–4 May; Sidney Nolan *the Gallipoli series* and Richard Grayson and Steve Wigg—*Monument*, at Samstag Gallery, Adelaide, April 20—June 1; Hossein Valamanesh at Greenaway Gallery April 26—May 27; Aida Tomescu at Greenaway Gallery, Adelaide June 27—July 22; Maarten Daudeij—*The Quest*—at Fontanelle, July 5—August 3 and *The God*, at CACSA Project Space, July 27—August 24; Paul Hoban *Transformal*—and Mark Kimber—*The Pale Mirror*, at Greenaway Gallery, July 25—August 31;

by Ken Bolton

It has been a slow year for me. Art-wise. I haven't seen a lot of shows I've liked. In any case, I've missed some. Has the art been better than my jaundiced eye reports, has my mood affected things? What did I respond to? Thinking back, the pairing, around Anzac Day, of Sidney Nolan's Gallipoli paintings with Grayson and Wigg's (restaged) *Monument* was very canny. And both were great, actually. Nolan's work still has impact and was good to see—and to view such an extensive number of works—cohering around a single stave of themes: war, and, appending to that central, world-historical scaled event, themes of friendship, of the individual's fear and courage, of their supposed perspectives on the war—on war generally, and on the justice of their being placed where they were in this particular war; and the adventure and oddness of being in the Middle East, strange and beautiful; themes of sudden violence; of the kinship with, or simply the fate of, animals (the army horses, principally); and of the interest of the landscape—of weird confrontations with the Other.

The Nolan showing filled the upstairs Samstag Museum. The works range, from memory, from the fifties through to the eighties. There were runs and sequences of work, suites around one particular theme and sometimes marked out by their format, size and materials. But the exhibition was very cohesive and any sketch-like works that might, on their own, have faded to a kind of opacity or silence, were buoyed, given context, by the works around them. These seemed diaristic, quickly drafted, notations—often urgent and fully expressive and communicative when shown amongst other, kindred works. Major pieces, like the large portraits, were quite striking—mostly existential or Beckettian in feel—humble and private instances of individuals considering their prospective fates.

Nolan's style looks increasingly singular over time and like a tool that gains him access to certain sorts of perception, that allows in many registers of experience, from that of the conventionally heroic to the day-to-day. I remember that I had once suspected it of being an affectation, a mannerism—a kind of much-vouched-for primitivism keyed to the psychical. Maybe it was once—but I think I've joined the rest of the world and 'seen sense', the penny has dropped, and it now seems an assured personal manner, legitimate etc. Bully for me? I guess so. And in any case one applauds the young Nolan's deliberate and aggressive recklessness and the style's then breathtaking abridgements and freshness, its ability to isolate a certain kind of content.

Richard Grayson and Steve Wigg's *Monument* was the restaging of a sculptural installation originally made in the early 90s or very late 80s: a version of the Arc de Triomphe in Paris, one derived from a small Vietnamese-manufactured souvenir that you might hold in your hand Wigg and Grayson had that model blown up 100 times and made their version in clay, unfired. The result, as at Samstag, is a triumphal arch that looks huge and yet amusingly small at the same time. The real Arc de Triomphe is another 50 times bigger. While it is undeniably large, it is clearly a miniature. In the Samstag gallery *Monument* looks

imposing. At the Samstag *Monument* fills the space well, crowding the viewer out of the central area. Its height exaggerated by the verticality of the Samstag's own proportions. At the same time, with its imperfections of detail—magnified in the process of embiggening the souvenir original—it looks slightly folksy and amusing, sort of endearing, a little bashful. The imperial ambitions look satirised by the simultaneous diminishment and expansion. The rhetoric of the decorative friezes on its sides (showing the figure of Fame, or perhaps the personification of France, trumpeting above the heroic soldiery that marches beneath) seems foolish, but also tragic, misguided: people sent to their deaths. In this respect it is a good show to run with Sidney Nolan's sequences around the Anzac theme.

Monument looks both 'Pop' and is cannily Minimal installation work as well. It presents, without commentary, or imposed 'style' even, an object found or selected from elsewhere. Its scale seems chosen along Minimalist lines. The rule of thumb in the 60s was that a piece should be approximately human: bigger was to become monumental, smaller was to become an object too easily controlled and overseen by the viewer's gaze and commanding height: so a work of about five foot and seven inches was calculated to shape up nicely with the viewer as an equal, an 'other'. Grayson and Wigg reduce an enormous architectural monument to a 'human' scale. In its first appearance at the Underdale campus gallery so long ago it had a great deal more space around it. There it looked smaller. Though the same size, it presented as more vulnerable to our gaze's will-to-find fault, to judge, to find jokes: it was abashed to find itself stranded in so expansive a space that it was not quite able to fill. Did it list more in Underdale? It probably didn't list at all. But it did look different in that much broader space. Samstag Museum's more vertical framing lent a degree of grandeur.

Made of unfired clay *Monument* was designed to deteriorate fairly quickly: so that over the period of its exhibition the clay flaked, peeled and fell away from its

scaffolding structure: the monument becomes a ruin, looking dignified, brave, 'noble' and testifying (contra Napoleon and empire) to all things passing.

As I write this I have just seen an exhibition of Aida Tomescu at Greenaway Gallery. Just as it seems irrelevant to harbour doubts about Nolan, so it seems odd to be thinking about Tomescu. And the oddness is all to do with Modernism.

Why paint in a manner that arrived in 1947 or 1952, that was achieved then by artists who believed in struggling to move 'beyond'—beyond the taste that endorsed previous styles, beyond the stylistic means and so-far-achieved ends of going styles? While these ideas are 'rhetoric', the 'pitch' of the time, and crude and put so baldly, can they be denied? A blunt and crude answer is, Yes. The criticism of the 50s, and 60s, has echoed in my head for a very long time, forming a particular idea of mid-century modernism. Central to my idea of it is a formulation that derived its authority, for me, from the twin and warring theorists, Clement Greenberg and Donald Brook. Greenberg said (in 1939?) that kitsch imitated the look and effects of art, that the avant-garde imitated (analysed, made evident, purified) art's means. This, in his essay 'Avant-Garde and Kitsch'.

Brook (in 1969? In 1974?) held that art (art "properly so-called"—his phrase, one I've always loved for its coat-trailing tendentiousness) dealt with ideas, the conceptually new, rather than the "essentially aesthetic" and rather than the (already) known. That which dealt in achieving already known effects—of form, of colour, of mode—and already known ideas or states or arguments—was craft. Craft was able to judge its products' success by yardsticks of already existing achievement and it proceeded by already tested methods, a matter of learned skills. This was not a bad thing, but it was not Art. For me the clear implication was that most contemporary art in most galleries was, by Brook's definition, craft. Under a Greenbergian judgement it would be kitsch. A rule of thumb, though a drastic one: if it looks like art it is very likely not art. (It's kitsch? It's craft?)

(Art, if you were wondering, would be on much less certain ground in judging itself or in attaining its difficult new ends. It was clear which new Bauhaus kettles worked in 1926—did they stand, did they pour did they look great?—but Duchamp's *Large Glass* of the same year was a more difficult proposition to judge, possibly even for the artist.)

Since I am seriously 'reducing' or traducing their arguments I had better claim responsibility for the small amount of thinking I have done in combining them and just for argument's sake say they are my ideas, or ideas I have had, derived (correctly or incorrectly) from these two sources. Greenberg is dead—and was always on record as saying, in a step back from his harsher view, that much representational work was in fact 'good', that most abstract art—because harder to do, having fewer safety nets or the support of narrative, representation, illusionistic space—was 'not good'. The rider, though, was that in his (1950s) view the best art could *only* be abstract. Donald Brook's ideas—which I've used and misused for my own ends—have likely developed a good deal since the early 70s, but for some time he has tended to tell the ('whole') art world that it is on the wrong track—that is not making Art.

'Whatever', as they say—and to cut a long preamble from rolling on too much longer—such an attitude lay behind much of modernism. The Heide gang—whose legend was so regularly reiterated in my formative days that I was by reflex automatically and predictably opposed to them—are entitled to the style they won through to, which they did in wartime isolation from Europe and 'the World' (aside from, say, intimations Vassilieff might have lent them) and so can claim originality. Nolan, the only one of them I can bare much of, is of their number. Aside from this, Melbourne's Heide Museum has recently shown a small Vassilieff retrospective—together with an exhibition of photos of the Heide members working and socialising, gardening and partying. So they've been on

my mind. A novelisation of their lives is selling well at the moment: maybe a lot of people are, again, thinking about them. In Australia they have been 'blue chip' for a long time. And this leads to a build-up of indifference, hostility, boredom. Unavoidable.

Aida Tomescu—and of course she is not alone in this—is operating with a style that looks very much like Art. She is operating with a style whose appearance is totally acceptable on the basis of earlier styles that could be said to have, with difficulty and daring and great concentration, won their way beyond the limits set by earlier styles and to have done so by wrestling with the conventions of representation (Impressionism's, Cubism's, Surrealism's) and of style and expression (again, the list as above, but also Symbolism, German Expressionism, de Stijl, classicisms of various kinds). Crutches kicked away! Acceptance gained after initial resistance, and so on.

Tomescu operates safely well back from the wall modernism 'rushed' towards: the black painting (of Malevich, of Ad Reinhardt), the paintings of Ryman, of Rauschenberg, the suave infantilism and barbarity of Twombly. We can like it, applaud it, where it hits upon—"achieves", the nobler word—a balance, the look of coherence, in tandem with (to give it 'interest') a look of wild or arbitrary uncontrol, excitement. To see the latter as novel we must forget where we have seen it before: in Pollock, in the so many toiling in the expressive divisions of late abstract painting since the 60s. Or we must discern degrees of difference in her work.

Much of the audience for these paintings is appropriately—I was going to say "equally"—ignorant of this history—a history of successive styles' wonderful ugliness becoming acceptable and being replaced by a next, newly ugly and exciting style that has rendered the previous achievement now safe and 'historical'. This audience may know the *story*, in some form: they have not

experienced the actual succession of styles. Well, who has, who can? This last is a fair response from a young artist—but the answer to it is that the past has to be recovered imaginatively if we're serious, by study and thought: read about the work, think about the work, look at the work.

Or stay away? Be bravely vulnerable, innocent?

Tomescu's current paintings at Greenaway for the most part don't play to her strengths. Commendable that the artist steps away from that area of safety. What I think is her most successful work has been much more graphic than most of the works in her 2012 Greenaway show. Line is the hero—line bridging and linking, or occluding and cancelling—line over areas and shapes (that constitute presences, absences, depths and planes within shallow or deep space). This venturing line has been her most delicious device. Tomescu's line has been able to suggest graffiti, careless or vehement gesture, recklessness and grace and speed and delicacy.

The works in the current exhibition (*Spora 1*, or *Kansas*, say) seem not to be retrieved—or won—from the 'jaws' of clumsiness, banality, indifference, in the way some past works have. (Here the most successful was the piece upstairs, *Ardoise IV*, of 2007. But it was not characteristic of the exhibition generally. It was graphic, line was active, light and dark were the terms: most of the current works shown were colour-related, painterly more than graphic, the colour scheme often red and yellow, marking out areas rather than line. These did not seem to me to work.)

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The art / craft, art / kitsch binaries suggest quizzical responses. What happens to old art, is it still 'Art'? Donald might have answered: It doesn't matter, but it is hard to imagine him doing so.

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The art / craft, art / kitsch pairings might suggest that Craft and Kitsch are interchangeable terms? Maybe. But even the term Art might not be used identically, each definition working with differing ideas of Art. If we introduce "Modernism" (well I already had) and "avant-garde", we have further work to do. These terms are not interchangeable either. Was modernism, for a time, avant-garde, if not constituting the whole of the avant-garde? Greenbergian, formalist modernism, as Greenberg, Fried and others characterised it (a kind of retrospective defining) would have nothing political behind its modernism. And we associate the whiff of grapeshot, Molotov cocktails, of *épater la bourgeoisie* at least, with the term "avant-garde", if not in fact revolution—at the very least a desperate attempt at change, at novelty. Greenberg's favoured kind of modernism might not be the historical reality: the Europeans talk much less of modernism than of modernité and 'the modern'. And their usage takes its bearings on the changes stemming from the Enlightenment and on the subsequent social revolutions in the European nineteenth century and on the art that attempted to be adequate to those changes: Courbet, Manet and so on, and Baudelaire. Their conception of it, in visual art, is not (as Greenberg's was) formalist. *One must at all costs be absolutely modern! Make it new! Art shall march in the very van—with Science and Industry.* These admonitions, maxims and predictions (of Pound, Saint-Simon and others) become more specific (tactically), and more style-related, in Rimbaud's call for *rhetoric's neck to be strangled.*

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Revivalism? But revivals must come back with irony, with sarcasm, with some distance and difference—or perhaps with simply greater intensity? Dale Frank, anyone?

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Anything goes? Postmodernity means of course you can do it?—make abstract art, without paying dues, or taking on board any particular brief the style once had attached???. It's all available now, for appropriation? Not really. (“Permission to relax, sir?”—and ‘Postmodernity’ says, “Granted!”? Not really.) The result is very likely to be imitation-bordering-on-forgery—or a style that lacks the tension that comes of the fuller investment in the work and its processes. There's irony, right, and pastiche? Yes, but they, too, require understanding, or an interesting *mis*understanding, of the original—else what is being ironised, critiqued, rejected?

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Installation arrived very rapidly at its usual ways of failing: a *cul de sac* reached very quickly and occupied ever since with a degree of bustle or activity, as if unaware that the journey was over: installation had hit the wall soon after leaving the station. Ironic given that it seemed the outcome of the minimalist/conceptualist ‘moment’ which reacted to Painting's having arrived at an impasse.

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Another ‘irony’ that will have occurred to the reader, I assume, might be noted—might be ‘raised’ even, as an objection: that in this text we have a critic working

with the rather ancient ideas of the 50s and 60s, some of them, to upbraid contemporary artists he deems to be working with old styles of more or less that exact era. If the reader thinks this is a 'disabling criticism', as we say around here when we're yarning, by all means take all this with a grain of salt. Or stop reading if you needed an excuse.

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Aida Tomescu, somewhere, warns us off reading her work as expressionist but insists they are the patient attention to a search for forms and effects that the painting and its materials signal. ('Signal'? Not propose, not suggest, not manifest? The correct weight depends upon the verb chosen and Tomescu's (catalogue) description of her process is good. It suggests the variability of the relation she sets up or works towards. "'One thing changes, passes onto another, each image becomes both a work in itself, and also a step towards another, imminent productive of something else.'" She continues, "As I begin to feel my way into the work there is also this mounting tension between what I see, know or hope is there and what I struggle to see on that surface. ... There is a moment when the surface I've been working with becomes very responsive—opening up intriguing possibilities: I am no longer engaged with a passive surface ... You can't afford dead space in a painting. But paradoxically there is also a slowness to the image, a delay. ... I am trying to control the image yet at the same time needing to unfix it, to have it breathe".) I've nothing against this as a way of working provided that the circularity is acknowledged: the picture of itself proposes nothing: the accidents or incidents the artist describes are produced by her and it is her human eye and human nature, human brain, that ascribes them to the matter. I understand that Tomescu eschews/avoids personality and ego (as opposed to some readings of, say, Jackson Pollock—though, in fact, *very like* many readings of him)—and avoids the inflationary identification of what she does find with dramatized Jungian or mythological categories. Even so, the Other

she encounters is of human devising or intuiting. *Must humans be wrong?* is a stronger rejoinder than, *What's wrong with that?* It's true—there's just us, in my view, so we're all we've got. The 'other' that her paintings surprise or unveil is related to that Cy Twombly visited. (I love these anthropomorphisms and personifications, so easy to satirise.) Twombly's others might have been more searing, more wistful, more nostalgic, more 'classical'? Was his a rediscovered one, a perception that belonged to 'the Romans'? Was it they *who believed it* (allegedly) and we *who'd have liked to?* (Or we who would "have liked to have"?) It has often seemed to me that some of his work tricked people into thinking, wishfully thinking, *Ooh, this is what it was like to be civilized, sensual and pagan!* (Like Robert Motherwell, in fact, wanted to be.) *This is the life! Stoicism, cruelty, sensation, faeces and urine, Life and Death, roses—I'm really living! Senses at-wang, abraded, scarified, whipped—swooning, exhilarated ... at the wild made tasteful.*

Twombly's acceptance over the 80s and 90s seems to me to have been eased by—maybe dependent upon—the taste for his surfaces having come before. Being of the same cohort, initially, as Johns and Rauschenberg, he was heir to the autographic mark of the Abstract Expressionists. Where Johns and Rauschenberg ironised it, subjected it to show trials, Twombly was more taken with it, even with its claims rendered more attenuated. (In the high-art world expressionism's time had passed: Pop, Minimalism, Conceptualism all considered it passé, its rationale denied, its good faith doubted.) But the taste for the 'artful mark' (smear, scumble, splash, stuttering line—the whole range) passed into interior design, fashion, home-decoration, commercial art. It was primitive, it was elemental, it was basic and it could be 'minimal', tasteful, restrained as well as luxurious. Knocking on the door for acceptance, Twombly's style was readmitted. (70s New York painting had 'failed'; its antagonists, Pop and Minimalism, were now gone, historical; and Europe, written off in the 50s and 60s, might be the source of renewal or a connection with more ancient verities.

The German New Wildness—of Kiefer, Penck and others, was in town, and the Transavantgarde Italians (Cucchi, Paladino et al), there were overlooked European movements asking to be re-examined (Yves Klein, Cobra, Arte Povera). And there was Cy, persistent after all these years in the wilderness—at any rate ignored by *Artforum* and *October*—and rather liked by Europeans who could afford to buy American art but preferred not to. Is this thumbnail-sketch art history—does it stand in relation to the real thing as the nightly three-minute financial report does to ‘Economics’?—storyboarded as for Shaun Micallef? May be.

The same taste hangs on, the default mode. Though is ‘mode’ the word?—a default aesthetic ‘demand’ perhaps. Hardly a *lingua franca* since its claim is to constituting a *tabula-rasa* or base-position given. It vouches for and enables Tomescu’s art, kindred I think to Twombly’s. It’s funny, the grounds on which you might reject it: hard-head 60s-derived animus against ‘the expressive’, 80s/90s distrust of all aestheticism and essentialism, or the contemporary non-reaction to the old media and its funny, quaintly arty ways. I suppose one might try an archly cranky impatience with modernism and abstraction *tout court*. Here the two modes—mid-century reaction against the modern, and postmodern incomprehension—make for another death-knell for twentieth-century High Art, its achievements, its understanding. To be abandoned along with the Enlightenment? as the West shrinks or collapses, loses impetus? fails to trust itself? cautious and incautious at once—respectful of others and doubting itself at the high-cultural level; violently reactive at the level of diplomacy and foreign policy, yep? Or am I living in a cloud-cuckoo land of my own devising, and better off attending to Aida Tomescu?

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Tomescu doesn't deserve to have all this asked of her art. She is not the only 'abstract' painter out there. (Remember *The Situation Now?*—the title of a once well-known exhibition of post-object art, its title deliberately echoing Lenin and questions of 'What is to be done'—for its radical chic, not out of irony.) The situation now is that abstract art goes on—as if the 70s had not tried to hunt it to its extinction, as if that hunt had come out of the 'logic' of modernist development and the abstract could flourish—'quietly'—now that modernism had been supplanted by *post*-modernism, which latter could be interpreted as a simple general tolerance. (No more rules!) Meanwhile the number of people with a taste for it, an understanding of it, has shrunk. It becomes mandarin 'good taste'—Paddington, Sydney, and up-state New York, or Long Island? To the young, it seems pointlessly *recherché* and opaque, or a little quaint, not very digital or televisual? Or do some of them find it just personal and expressive, thrillingly 'free' and 'untrammelled' (as in Frank O'Hara: "Free! Free, that's all! Never argue with the movies!")?)

Base-level public taste always lags, of course. For advertising, for ABC art programs, for SALA week, bright, flung and splashed paint serves to signify 'art', like jacuzzis signify 'good living'.

And that base-level taste for the gestural and the abstract—are they in no way present in Tomescu's aesthetic decisions? (Of course add the other names to hers: Michael Taylor, Robert Jacks and the rest.) Does most abstract art not look, suspiciously, a bit like 'Art'? If artis are going to beaver on, quietly, under the new dispensation, Aida Tomescu is one you would condone: the works and the process do seem bravely committed to this private avocation.

But why discuss this? Doesn't it all fall under the Intentionalist Fallacy? The artist's intending outcome 'A', or effect 'A', doesn't guarantee that the work achieves effect 'A', or conveys meaning 'A'. Shouldn't the critic and the viewer

concentrate entirely on what *is* there, what *is* achieved? Well, knowing intended effects, knowing the working aesthetic, once we do, affects our relation to the art, and it can educate us to see what is there. But in any case, the intention is important to the artist: they want the work to hit its target, be as they wished.

Which brings us to Paul Hoban: *Transformal*—showing at Greenaway Gallery. Hoban's method would seem to eschew intentionality and seek to escape the individual's personal aesthetics. Hoban builds-in chance to his procedures—or at least a kind of blindness or removal of the artist's controlling hand. I had thought this was to escape the self and to 'risk the other'. But Hoban's recent statement seems to hope the work appeals to, accommodates, the broadly human. The process involves building the paintings' layers in reverse, working on them in various aleatory, or more determined, ways, then peeling the whole away for mounting (reversed) on a canvas—perhaps after some further scratching and reworking (that I suppose doesn't have the intense personal commitment of Tomescu's involvement—though her involvement probably hoped to escape 'the purely personal', too). And the unveiled result is the work perhaps. Or more work may be done to it subsequently? I'm not sure how strict Hoban's self-imposed procedural protocols are.

In many of these works are circular shapes that (I think rather fondly) the artist hopes might especially facilitate the pan-human. ("In these works, lattices, parallels and circles are the primary vehicles. The circles have become holes large enough for a hand to pass through—portals through the paintskin membrane. To me the wholes seem to suggest another place glimpsed beyond the veneer of this world and this time. I am sure that this would be an idea familiar to the first artists decorating their own skins or conjuring beasts through the cracks in cave walls.") This seems funny to me. But we might bracket all that out as just 'the artist's own business' and like the paintings themselves. As

humans, yes. I'm not sure who else likes paintings. A lot of people like Paul Hoban's. I find myself among their number.

Hoban's processes, as described, seem less ways of importing 'the other' than ways of evading the delimitingly 'personal' and also ingrained, learned taste. (Hoban does not *claim* the latter here. The criteria by which pictures are deemed successful, or disowned as unsuccessful, are not described. Are any pictures *not* shown?) I liked some of these to a fair degree: *Fiery crown* was a pale, pale grey, or off-white, with tiny flecks or commas of black showing through and a bit more black showing on the sides, or 'supports', of the painting also involved. The black's effect was teasing, but pleurably so and it enlivened the whole large field of the painting, a horizontal rectangle. Others? *Ginger* looked rather 'historical', as though it might date from the 50s or 60s, though the similar *Curb* and *Spruiker* looked less interesting, less busy, less complex. *Roko*, *Kiki* and *Kiki II* were nice—and very 'pretty'—but for me didn't have much holding power.

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What else have I thought about in galleries this last few months? Hossein Valamanesh had a small but fairly concentrated group of pieces at Greenaway's (in May). It was a sombre set, themed around memory and identity. There were autobiographical elements (photos of the very young Hossein in his mother's hands), things remembered from childhood and early youth. One work was a striking image of hands clasped loosely together and with the thumbs alternately replacing each other, lifting one over the other to be briefly on top. This action was looped in the film so that it repeated endlessly. We viewed it from above, looking down: it suggested both that the pair of hands were ascending a well towards one and it suggested pattern and interweaving (to say nothing of patience and endurance, strength and fortitude). It was a practice of the artist's father's. Strongest of all were some very large reconstructions of the ceiling

structure of the local mosque. This looked like a drawing, but was in fact made up of many mounted wooden pieces (actually lotus leaf material). Another version was natural ochre applied to paper. Both works were mounted on plywood. For a second one thought 'Frank Stella'. But this was not right. The works did have that facticity, but not thinned out by mere preoccupation with formalist dicta about flatness or 'what-you-see-is-what-you-get'. The effect of these was strangely obdurate and compelling. Dour. It read as strong memory—as a testament *to* that memory and as regret at intervening time: the past is another country, and a past *in* another country is doubly removed from the expatriate artist. It seemed also re-affirmation of ties with the past, and origins, and recognition of distance. There were other elements—among them some that recalled eyes, the maternal or grand-maternal protective gaze, that echoed the two hands and criss-crossing thumbs. It was quiet but very strong show.

Mark Kimber's *A Pale Mirror* showed at Greenaway's at the same time as Paul Hoban. These were uniformly smallish pictures of simple architectural elements, or of architecture-in-landscape, all backlit in a slightly theatrical, gothic, *noire* or art-deco-Gothic manner and close to duochrome: black on blue, or on rose, or on washed out glimmer. *And atmospheric to a fault!* Misty, foggy, still and trembly. They looked good. "A mirror with a memory" was an early description of daguerrotypes, quoted in the catalogue, and the pictures (and the exhibition title) evoke that early photography and focus on a spectral, slightly threatening or ominous mystery and danger about 'the big (modern) city' and danger in the empty reaches of the night. They remind also of pinhole cameras and simple silhouettes with slightly fuzzy outline, images emerging but receding into atmosphere. Their appeal is to a kind of nostalgia.

Maarten Daudeij has mounted a number of exhibitions in artist-run spaces over the last year or so, and has shown twice this year: one exhibition at Fontanelle—*The Quest*—and another, *The God*, at CACSA's Project Space. *The Quest* was a

little uneven, and I am not sure how unified it was meant to be. Its title suggests that it was, that it had a thesis, or a subject. If so it was 'the artistic endeavour', as romantically conceived—and alternative views to that perspective. I think. The main, longer walls of the Fontanelle gallery space were devoted to two sequences of identically formatted works. On one wall was a series of depictions of artistic fates—doomed artists' lives: madness, failure, alcoholism, poverty, disillusion, suicide, all captioned with phrases warning of these likely outcomes. ("Warning: artists may exhibit pathological tendencies." For example. I don't think it mentioned Boredom, or Irrelevance.) Opposite was a series of printed posters, *Metaphysical Readymade Posters*, all text and very clear and clinical or 'governmental' in design (fonts, layout and design—all spoke 'administration'). These seemed a riposte to the *vie boheme* scenarios that they faced down. In fact they are a series of posters that name a putative work (the '*Metaphysical readymade*' object), the Gallery in which it shows, and give the date. They thus propose the existence and the availability of these (invisible) objects, states, concepts, for contemplation. (Daudeij has put these posters up in the relevant European cities.)

What else was there? On the floor was what might have been a small bomb. (Nineteenth-century anarchism?) My favourite piece was a simple poster, like a piece of 60s concrete poetry: it had a circles of type which spelled out 'what is the question is what is the question is what is the question'. As a circle it had no end or beginning and so *The question is, What is the question?* seemed the rhetorical point it made—to the arts community, to all citizens? The style reminded me of Klaus Staeck, the Art and Language group, even Daniel Buren. Anyway, Daudeij is clearly not in the romantic mould, or hasn't bought into the myth. Nor does *The Quest* seem to provide answers, though it is amused at 'the artist's' current predicament. I am reminded of (Art and Language's) Terry Atkinson remarking, testily, that it wasn't technical competence that artists needed so much as "ideological competence". The opinion reflects the

conceptualist's low priority on medium and on (craft) skills and the assertion of art's conceptual brief.

Daudeij's *The God* runs in that other high European direction that cohabited with the rationalist-conceptualist wing of the avant-garde, the Shamanistic opponent of the rational. Joseph Beuys being the leading figure, but perhaps think also Yves Klein. The exhibition's propositions were put rather ironically. The first item one encountered was that titled *The God*. It resembled, a little, Man Ray's *The Enigma of Isadore Ducasse—or Mysterious Object*. A shape, under a canvas cover, spread across and covering a small office desk, four legs of which appeared below, with one leg disguised, made lumpily leonine and declarative or peremptory, and baroque, by being wrapped in a warm, earthy material. The others remained as standard thin black metal desk legs. At the more insistent corner the wrapped and shrouding canvas material rose to signal a head shape and this had a bit of cardboard affixed to it: the 'head' thereby addressed or confronted the viewer and looked amusingly bizarre as well as a tiny bit off-putting. The cardboard face gave it two perfectly round eyes and a large circular mouth.

The other pieces in *The God* were—as with *The Quest*—a little emptily jokey, risking a deliberate tinniness. They were wall-mounted, two-dimensional, pictures. *The True Argument Proves Itself Wrong* was a pale painting (or painting-shaped surrogate), a small corner of which was broken off and lay (affixed, surely) to the ground below. *The Thoughts of the Wise Are Bound by Gravity* looked like a rather reticent or embryonic Paul Hoban painting. The same circular 'portals' figured. A few of them had clustered towards the bottom of the painting, drifting down I guess. On another wall were three small pictures, a suite of *Peripheral Visions*. One, parenthetically subtitled *Eagle*, was a photograph of a paint tray (of the sort paint rollers are dipped into), propped against a wall. In the top half of the tray is what looks like a spill, or mere pooling, of half-mixed paint,

black and white lines which also suggest an eagle about to land, talons down, on some notional prey. Heraldic. It requires the painting's title to key one into seeing this vision, but it *is* there. Conjured, by the magical artist? The next— parenthetically *Crashed Painting*—is a photo of canvas in a kind of 'crashed' state lying on a floor. The third also looks like 'casual mess'—all three do—but is (a photo of) a book on Australian art (*Brush Art in Australia*, which gives the work its subtitled name) lying open, face down and a little torn, a little trashed etc—but also echoing the outstretched 'wings' of the crashed painting and of the eagle. A soundtrack accompanied *The God* exhibition, the irregular but pretty constant rumble of heavy objects being dragged or moved, stacked or shoved, as in a warehouse.

The stagey quality I take to be deliberate, and it invites or dares one's incredulity, but only, I am sure, because the artist believes these preposterous proposals have something in them: they are the jokily contoured model of what we think art might do or should do or could do, they speak of an other (other world, other episteme) to the constrained, rational and administered life. Maybe? It seems to me they propose it, honour it as they say, 'in the breach'. They do not propose it with conviction. The two exhibitions show Daudeij striking very different attitudes—and both are very much provocations about the role of art, the role of the artist, the objects within them being almost like surrogates, standing *for* works of art—within the overall gesture which is each show.

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Around the issue of conviction, Daudeij's stances, his available terms of reference, are quite different from Aida Tomescu's: who can doubt the intensity of her involvement? (Though I note that I've allowed myself to doubt Twombly's—on no real evidence. And it's not that I haven't liked' his work.)

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Way back early in the year (April 5th—May 4th) was an exhibition, *Endless Summer*, around the theme of Surfing at Nexus Gallery: with some usual suspects and some young and eager newbies. All of them ‘delivered’—in the sense that the show was fun and entertaining at the very least. The participants were James Dodd, Christian Lock, Brad Lay and Henry Jock Walker. It was curated by Logan MacDonald. A stand-out—because it was unusual—was a wonderfully ‘impure’ and ‘informal’ collaborative piece, overseen or authored by Henry Jock Walker. It was film and showed at first a rather ordinary painting ‘of’ surfing. Next the film showed a (staged) ‘real life’ scene, in a studio. After a few seconds one realised it had its areas of colour arranged to recall the earlier painted object, the same colours—an intense, oceanic sky-blue and some bright orange, and lots of white. Thru the scene a figure moves, quickly, and as if it is a ghostly double-exposure, then a wave form is simulated via nineteenth-century theatrical means: ribboned blue cloth is shaken and a bucket of water is tossed. One got a momentary but strong intimation of surfing the barrel of a tube of ocean wave. It was great because so playful and so artificial—yet with all this being true it summoned up sensations of sky and light, waves and salt tang. The jokey and improvised nature of the production’s methods was a large part of its charm.