

Worldless, Wordless—Grey Scale

Artists: Li Gang—*in the grey scale*—at AEF, Adelaide, January 27—February 18; *Lost For Words*—John Barbour, Louise Haselton, Olga Sankey, Simone Slee, Sandra Uray-Kennett—at SASA Gallery, Adelaide, March 1—March 23^r.

by Ken Bolton

Li Gang's exhibition, *in the grey scale* (curated by Tony Trembath), was interesting on a number of counts, some of which perhaps consist of 'questions to think about', that disappear, evaporate, upon their being thought through. The work remains interesting in its own right, importantly, but with some of the initial excitement having melted away.

The initial *frisson* the exhibition generates is made up of: *How Chinese is it?* and *How intriguing to see* Chinese work that looks neither traditional nor like White Rabbit art (that is, Pop-ish, ironic/sarcastic, highly finished, glossy, bright and cheeky). *How Western is it?* springs to mind, too. And as well, Li Gang employs hybrid cameras made by stitching together parts from various old and curious cameras the artist has come by: this has some attraction to those interested in pin-hole cameras, cheap Russian-made cameras and so on. In this, the day of the digital rather than the analogue, there is in the air some *nostalgia for the old medium, reaction against the new*.

Finally, *Li Gang—in the grey scale* shows *contemporary life in China*. (To what effect?) And it has 'abstract', formal properties that are of interest as well, and we attend to them.

So, a number of issues attach to the works.

Li Gang has been running an artists' collective and workshop in China for some years and has been practising there for a little over a decade—all subsequent to training in Western Australia and Melbourne. This might be part of the answer to the question, *How Chinese is it?* (*How Chinese is White Rabbit art?* is another. Is the latter representative, does it represent a particular, but not a general, tendency? And so on.) Li Gang's work here shows subject matter that is incidentally Chinese—or in some cases Korean. The themes might be 'the everyday', 'the ordinary'. (*In the grey scale* features a series of casually taken

images (casual in their framing, their orientation varying from the upright—and casual in their seeming quickness). In one sequence people are recorded on their way to work, feet trudging by one particular spot; in another, the feet of people waiting at a railway station are noted; there is a set of dark, landscapey shots—trees, a lake, heavily underexposed and dark—with clearly visible blemishes in the printing, apparent flaws in the lens and so on. There is a set printed very pallidly—or much overexposed—with those same characteristics.

The theme might equally be a poetry of loss—a mourning, or at least a noting, of change, impermanence.

In all cases these formal ‘velleities’ produce abstract virtues. The work slows before us, images become not figurative but to do with abstraction, stillness, graphic or compositional gesture, with space that is to be examined for very fine gradations in the eye’s search for ‘incident’. By contrast, photographs more fully and conscientiously reporting details of appearance would read quickly, the light and dark be coded differently. Li Gang’s images slow our vision and bring it to bear on medium as well as content.

In this interplay between abstraction and visual reportage, between information and a more meditative or ‘surrendered’ attitude before the surface of the pictures, there is an affinity with traditional Chinese aesthetics—of calligraphic abstraction, of balances of minimal gesture against large space, of the mark’s ability to inflect or mobilise ‘empty’ space, and so on.

The photographs have a 1900s look: a metaphor that says this almost-present is vanishing, fugitive, soon to be forgotten and no longer recuperable: hence its being made to resemble the famously *past* Paris of the early twentieth century—and hence it’s being analogue rather than the ubiquitous digital whose readily available perfection we hardly attend to—it registers, it slips down too quickly.

Li Gang puts the medium between us and the reality it records, fascinated with the problem of how opaque or transparent the photographic medium is. The medium in these instances plainly ‘mediates’. The foregrounding of medium, you’ll say, *isn’t that modernist?* Is it nostalgia for modernism? Is it elegy for the vanishing present? Is the work signalling its elegiac nature, consciously, by its allusion to ... Paris? To modernism? to ‘the work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction’? *la belle epoch*? Li Gang taps the West’s heavy investment in this nexus of themes, issues and history.

Urban life under State Capitalism and under Free Market Capitalism might share many characteristics—in terms of numbers, pace, interpersonal relationships, conformity, anonymity, consumerism? Li Gang’s work would seem to testify to this.

The 'authenticity / inauthenticity' 'trope' (or is it a 'diode'?) is of course a kind of moebius strip and undecidable: should Li Gang *try* to be 'Chinese'? Like an actor rather than a real person? 'Chinese' the way Les Murray, say, is Australian, or Jack Thompson? I think of Walter Abish's novel *How German Is It*—about a German culture or generation fixated on US popular culture: How German is Wim Wenders, for example? Yet, by the same token, his particular fascination with US culture might have been 'very German'?

The impertinent 'How Chinese Is It?' is a good for leading, at least, to the answer, How would I know? It sounds impertinent: because *only an Outsider could ask it?* And as an outsider they can not judge perhaps. Yet recognition is possible without understanding.

What might be Chinese is the particular flavour of the attitudes behind the work. Attitudes to chance, and to chance-and-form. Some of these attitudes might, alternatively, be sourced in Duchampian enthusiasms: an enthusiasm for surrender to accident and to arbitrary system. Western, we might think. But they are probably also part of Chinese aesthetic DNA.

Some of the appeal of these things was originally legitimised, in the West, by reference to 'the East', to Zen Buddhism etc. Think, for example, of Cage, of Degas.

I mention Degas, meaning to cite his 'arbitrary' framing of scenes and their sometimes 'modern', defamiliarising angles of vision (the picture's point of view, sometimes close behind another's head, at another vertiginously above and looking down)—thought to derive from both Japanese art, and from photography.

Do we see Degas as *French enough*? Do we ask of Degas, How French is it?

(The French *have* asked similar questions: in the 20s and 30s Derain was held, by some, to be 'more French' than Matisse. Braque, on the other hand, was not ever, I think, held to be too Spanish because of the influence of Picasso, though perhaps pitied a little for playing second string.)

And I say Degas (as I might also say Manet, or Lartigue, Doisneau, Brassai, Kertesz et al) to remark how old-fashioned some of Li Gang's images look—their greyness, the blur, the tastefully asymmetrical framing of the motif, the delicate feminine ankles and shoes (remember how intimate and feminine were the subjects of much French avant-garde art of the time: Manet, Degas, Bonnard, Vuillard, Cassat, Morisot). It is not just a matter of the urban works' look—the subject, the worker in the street, is classically early-moderne.

The old-fashionedness makes the proposition that this contemporary Asia is disappearing. We face a Vanishing Present: ironically, poetically, regretfully. The present is seen disappearing, is recognised, saluted, farewelled and registered, 'put in its place'. (Will the Chinese figure of the worker-on-the-bicycle, for example, suddenly be 'consigned' to the past? Will the standard-issue cap and clothes be replaced by consumer fashion items that change markedly decade by decade—where the dark pants and tops, as worn by the man cycling to work, that could fit (at a guess) with any time since WW1, become suddenly yesterday, ancient history, 'old school'?)

Sentiment and sentimentality attach to some of the work in this regard.

Bracing this 'old-fashioned' aspect of the work, is the feel that derives from the series format. The conceptual gesture that these series enact and instance is more contemporary. Though, of course, born out of the 1960s and 1970s, it is now assimilated and causes less surprise. So Li Gang is scarcely breaking new ground. Still, the series factor gives a pleasing and unifying conceptual coherence to each set of pictures. Each sequence restricts itself to a task: images of people riding to work, feet of trudging workers and so on, and to a method, however casually defined: that the photos be taken quickly and at specified times and places (commuting hours, train stations, on the artist's morning route, perhaps). Ed Ruscha might have worked with similar parameters in the 60s to produce *26 Gas Stations*, or the *Parking Lots* series. Sixties L.A. Zen was a little less lyrical than Li Gang's. That would be the difference.

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Lost For Words, at SASA Gallery over the Adelaide Festival period, is a group show whose artists all produce work in which text features. Text doesn't, in fact, feature too pointedly in many of the works shown. But its shadow, its presence as part of the soil from which the works grew, part of the sensibility that gave rise to them, is present. Subtly it works to inflect one's response to the work. Louise Haselton's pieces have been seen already in her CACSA exhibition—*errand workshop*—of a year or so past. They looked good there. They might have been the wordiest of the works shown in that exhibition: they can look like letters, and surely they ape them—in a jubilant cavorting dance along the back wall of the SASA gallery. In the context of *Lost For Words* Haselton's pieces act contrarily and differently. The cavorting, the boldness of the figures they cut, emphasize the physical, the sculptural. So that here in *Lost For Words* they might be the least 'wordy' in the exhibition. They have colour aplenty and strong silhouette, and are made of pleasingly obdurate, shaped material, Metal, wood etc. If the exhibition establishes a field and a range, Haselton's contribution marks one far corner of it. They are terrific pieces. And, seen as we meet them in *Lost For Words*, at the far end of a long gallery, they strike a brassy, insouciant note, triumphant, amused

and amusing. At CACSA we viewed them closer to, and, as well, there was family resemblance with other of her works in the show. They look good again, but different or differently.

Lost For Words is very well balanced: in their different ways the works or groups of works have quite equal presence. In the centre are works by Olga Sankey (curator of the show) and Sandra Uray-Kennett. Uray-Kennett's line of suspended glass panes, that face each other, mirroring and reflecting mutely, are meant, I think, as a metaphor for the gaps, elisions and absences that might be witnessed, intuited, guessed at—metaphorically—in schizophrenia or bi-polarity. The work aims, not, says Uray-Kennett, at the state as it is experienced by the sufferer, but at the experience of one outside and witnessing the illness.

At each end of the line of panels is a wooden chair: the chairs might be said to interview each other, or to indicate two subject positions and the glass to be their communication, or their lack of communication. Entitled 'Not to be looked at until your return', it illustrates current, inevitably inexact conceptions as to mental health, language, identity etc. The illustration Uray-Kennett provides coincides with these ideas well enough for people to assent to the work. But it can tell us little. It does give a sense of the frustration and probable loneliness consequent upon the condition, together with a sense of its opacity for the person outside it, but to some degree it illustrates what we think of this 'known unknown', what we have *chosen* to think, agreed to think.

Uray-Kennett also shows a wall-mounted work. This last, 'Catching breath: when things achieve nothingness') is terrific. Both pieces showed first at FELT gallery at the tail end of 2011. 'Catching Breath' looked good at FELT and it looks good here: better, more than differently. Its connection to language is not firm but is sufficient in this context to make the work suggestive of script. Like Haselton's sequence it shows as a line—a line of *fine* lines, some solid, some projected. As script, of course, it is baffling. (Again, this is part of its purported/intended connection to the theme of mental illness.) Whether one knows this or not the work is very beautiful. 'Catching Breath' is a long, wall-mounted constellation of the wire metal supports that shape lampshades—rings and circles, cupolas and domes of thin wire: of near transparency. The gallery lights play across them from multiple angles and this has the effect of casting the wires' shadows interestingly: they cross each other; they are elongated; they can read as script (or quasi-script) and as drawing or design; they make, at any one point, a slight puzzle and are easily (and pleasurably) distinguished from one another, though the clarity is always temporary. A cloud of circular, floral shapes and ellipses. Was the heyday of these lighting fixtures the 1960s? Actually, no. But the arabesques, curves and cup shapes that the wire throws onto the wall—and, in fact, the more staid shapes of the actual wire—are somehow very sixties. A kind of graphic style that seemed to me a cliché even when I was a kid *in the sixties*,

here seems wondrously elegant. As though it has only now found its true form. I was reminded of the credits to things like the *Pink Panther* movies, the packaging associated with In-Shops and Mr John's. (Boutiques now long passed.) The work is beautiful, but not firmly tethered to its intended meaning. Well, maybe it *is* 'firmly tethered'—but it is so only by convention: the imagery (scrambled lines, like the blank glass reflecting blank glass) represents mental illness by reference to our unexceptionable, general-enough prior agreement as to its nature. Olga Uray-Kennet also means to suggest what she calls schizophrenia's "hermetic and isolating sublimity". Her pieces do suggest some of this quality.

Olga Sankey has been working with handwritten script in inventive ways for quite a while now. Often Sankey's texts will be mottos, memos, prayers, injunctions—and repetition is a feature—as with prayer and prayer-forms, like the litany. (Often this has entailed a wry joke as to neurosis, wishful thinking, hopelessness. Her works can also seem anguished and existential.) The larger of her works in this show, 'Pompei', is a formation of panels, their faces in parallel, in ragged formation behind each other. We peer through the transparent panels, to see text that might constitute the recognisable shapes of continents (South America, Africa?) within speech balloons. A world, then, that varies as these 'continental' shapes overlay each other from panel to panel. Or are they verbal representations made about those worlds? What *does* the microscopic text say? It turns out to be a writerly scribble and not words after all—a representation of inconsequential chatter, of nervous, inconclusive thought, perhaps clashing world views?

Sankey's second piece, 'Lost', has two small shallow boxes that each frame a pale print—white on pale grey—of a tree, one a view of the tree top, the other I think of leaves and trunk. On the first is the word "Where", on the second "There". There is interesting visual play made with the 'T' and the 'W', which float closer to us than the body of the words (which in both cases is the word "here"). And this hovering has a subtle effect on the mind—of double-takes and catch-ups. It's the sort of circuiting, short-circuiting and quasi punning that one-time Adelaide verbal funster Richard Tipping might have thought up—but Sankey brings more complex means to the site than Tipping normally can.

Simone Slee shows a bank of identically formatted colour photographs or posters. Each shows a figure in a more or less public space, holding a sign in front of themselves. The sign says *How long can I hold this up?* An occasional bemused or embarrassed onlooker can sometimes be seen beside the figure: a Japanese guy on a bus or in a train and so on, someone sharing briefly the same part of a street or cafe area. Not unamusing, but rather low voltage. Not unamusing, but almost.

The late John Barbour is represented by typical lateish works. I've written on John Barbour's work many times: so I refer anyone interested to that earlier writing. I was regularly a fan of Barbour's work, often liking it a lot, at other times disappointed. Barbour's integrity as an artist is not to be doubted, I think. So when I was again the art it was not always with breezy confidence. It seemed to me that some of its points were earned rather easily: often in play was a sentimental reading brought to the worn, the torn, the abused and overlooked, abraded and rejected. The mimicry of the frail, helpless voices of the down-and-out—that was involved in showing spindly, frail, 'challenged' text, their 'voices'—this sometimes seemed to me a cornball attempt at pathos. Where it was meant to be funny—though was it ever?—it seemed to me amusing. But then I thought it was John *parodying* this tactic. He may have been, but was he? At other times work from these phases of his output achieves a very real gravity. Again, it depends on the investment we make in it and how we feel about the literal, the metaphorical—*and how we feel John Barbour felt about them*—whether perhaps he liked us being made self-conscious about making and/or withdrawing that investment: the bind the work might put us in.

Lost For Words shows two Barbour pieces: 'untitled objects' from 2007 and 'rag man' from 2003. So, here we have the-work-barely-present, an arte povera, at once pretty, and forlorn, dispirited, and with a sense of John Barbour's own ambivalences, multiple readings and impulses. The objects mounted on the wall to make the piece 'untitled objects' are a line of brightly coloured rectangles of cloth, with 'streamer' tails of simple ribbon, mostly pale, barely registering against the wall.. A pale, menthol-green, triangular pennant-shape hangs a little higher to their left, as if it leads or marshal's the rest. One long tail reaches the gallery floor and spools there a little. No, two do—one is pale pink and registers more slowly. One of Barbour's delights and one of his tactics is to employ contrasts that are vastly underpowered in just this way. The effect is to draw the viewer closer, to produce an intimacy or close engagement with the material qualities (of shape, rough manufacture, textures etc) of each element, have us contemplate it as an act carried out, a record of simple decisions by the artist. Barbour would have us register an overall shape to the work and follow with an immersion in its parts, and then a pulling back to take in the whole again, our appraisal now modified by our responses to the individual parts. Something like personification or anthropomorphism might take place, but Barbour would have us be unhappy with it, of course. On the floor, leaning against the wall to the left of the 'marshalling' green pennant, is a round black disk with the word "Joy" painted on it. It causes the assembly of squares or kites to look abashed. *Do* they constitute 'joy'? they might wonder, hopefully or doubtfully.

'Rag man' was one of John Barbour's pieces whereon diaphanous white material, tacked to the wall, supported a message sewn incompletely onto it. Deliberately rickety, failing. A communication difficult to read, unamplified,

imperilled. Again a magnet for—or generator of—sentimental projections by the viewer, and the cause of some disease or self-consciousness as a consequence.

'Thought' does stand behind his works, certainly—grave, grimly amused, sardonic, humane. And the materiality of the works—despite a kind of thinness overall—is palpable. Often 'materiality' was invoked in connection with Barbour's work too readily, as though summoning the concept ended all argument. The argument was worth having, I think. I should say again, I am a fan. Seeing the work reminds of what we have lost with John's passing.