

Anton Hart Profile 2002

by Ken Bolton

Imagine my surprise when I ring the bell of artist Anton Hart's door only to have it answered by the artist, his hair just washed, and he dressed casually—almost as if for judo: there is something lean and functional about the Hart aesthetic that extends even to his clothes—his feet are bare, but otherwise the figure who greets me is in black. The famous eyes are green—but paler than I imagined them. He extends a hand... etc. Is that how profiles go?

My idea of Anton Hart's work stems from four solo exhibitions. Three I remember well. Of a fourth I recall only my own disappointment. Consequently I am very curious about that work, suspecting that I misread it, brought to it wrong expectations, that, in any case, I need to know that installation work to get a full sense of Hart's manner of thinking. It came third in the series of his solo shows. The other three I was very impressed by—and affected by—and so have thought a good deal about.

That fourth, occluded exhibition (*On The Deep*, CAC 1994) I am fixing and modelling—in the conceptual order I file under 'Anton Hart'—almost as if it were a planet, not itself visible, but knowable to a degree by its place in the order of other planets in its system, their movements about it. Not an analogy that will bear extending. Something similar happened with the first work of Hart's that I remember: it was a piece in a group show of 1990 called *Black Bud*. It is the work I remarked least in review of the exhibition. And it's become the work I remember best from it. It has nagged its way into my consciousness, or my aesthetic conscience has nagged me about a wrong judgement—as subsequent bodies of Anton Hart's work have assimilated that earlier work to themselves.

I am drawn to a vocabulary of 'orders' and solar systems etc—I think about it now as I write this—because I see Hart's work as a quite distinct body or take or procedure within Adelaide and Australian art. It is not out of place when thought of in the context of others' 90s art, here or elsewhere—but *it is not explained by it*, it is not (with variations) 'more of the same'. It has not genuflected at many of

the current stylistic or conceptual truisms, it has not been a mere exploration of 'permissions' granted by, say, Duchampian orthodoxy, by card-carrying minimalist Koonsian ironists, by grunge, 'bad' art and the rest. Anton Hart's work has seemed to me more thoughtful (which is relative—but in part I mean, not bravura, not avant-gardist next-steppism) and it has seemed more centered, more characteristic—not concerned to be wildly imaginative or unpredictably inventive: an imagination and invention focused on a connected chain of concerns or types of perception.

If I seem to be constructing some negatives against which to contrast Hart's work I am not. I don't require that work be idiosyncratic, coherent as a body. I admire a great deal that is shamanistically inventive, mercurial and all the rest. I appreciate the logic of next-steppism rather more than is sanctioned by the critically orthodox animus against notions of 'progress', originality or priority. Some of my favourite artists would seem to me to fall under these rubrics. Still, while of his time, Anton Hart's work is marked by its singularity. And I don't mean to deny his oeuvre the glamour of excitement: he is not dull. But one characteristic of his shows has been an air of authority. Knock-out exhibitions, but never, seemingly, knockout by a lucky punch. They have had about them an air of great decision. In Adelaide this puts them in a class with exhibitions by Bronwyn Platten or, to a degree, Popperwell and Kirby.

I quote from my own earlier attempts to fix Hart's work.

"Blind Fold", Anton Hart's exhibition at Chesser Gallery (1992), is a mildly disquieting yet familiar experience. And this is interesting. The show possibly proposes little beyond that and trusts to its instinct that it has isolated imagery which triggers responses which will name it—in an attempt at protection, insulation—as contemporary, with-it, groovy and edgy. All of which things the work is, but not simply stylishly so. And naming it thusly does not in fact inure one to the pieces' effect. *"Blind Fold"* differs then from severe, sophisticated, arty advertising imagery, or the sort of thing—like the drawings of Robert Longo—that should appear in an intelligent yuppy nightclub. Though it does bear some resemblance to these. Why not—fashion

does possess a certain accuracy. And Robert Longo was on to something.

All of which is to say that I initially distrusted the work—or distrusted my assent to it. Which needn't concern you I suppose. There are old-style artists—many of the best current artists are such—and there are image-makers—who deal less with constant and evolving themes than they throw up imagery that is both novel and telling—and by which we are affected and are moved to consider what its potency means. (This distinction, artist/image-maker, was one Meaghan Morris suggested at the last Artists Week.) Perhaps Hart is operating here on the image-maker side of the divide. Morris added, of course, that she found both sorts of practice valuable—and I'm not wishing, here, to argue for one over the other *or* to locate Anton Hart definitively in one or other camp.

"*Blind Fold*" consists principally of pictures of city buildings. They appear to be taken from TV or video imagery—and to be of sites of danger or threat—warehouses, relatively isolated buildings with no figures to be seen, photographed possibly at night—even, I thought, photographed with heat-sensitive film. In fact, though the images look mechanically or computer-processed, they are pastels—though the pastels are *based* on photo imagery that has been transmuted by such processing.

Each picture stands forth from the wall a good 25 cms, on a single mechanical, arm-like extension. This, and the nature of the imagery and its *mediated* look—colours a little oversaturated and blurred, detail suppressed as if by overexposure—give the pictures the look and presence of large video screens, the look even of surveillance imagery. The viewer feels as if trespassing in the territory being photographed. They are eerie pictures. The acrylic medium—cool, dry, surfacy—and the hard thinness of the board on which the pictures exist added to the effect of their being imagery *projected*, not physical or palpably present.

They did not imply an originating subject artist/viewer but the soulless gaze of the surveillance camera. The pictures—the installation—imputed a sense of *our* being looked at. To be so pitied, so regrettably excluded from their higher organization, is to have the works remove us from the subject's position of authority, stability and security. Instead they impart anxiety—via an *aesthetic* (of distortions and heightened colours) that is, paradoxically, Romantic. The modernity of Postmodernism.

The next exhibition, *Tremble*, (Union Gallery, 1993) was less baroque in its staging, less Gothic/Romantic in its tenor, and was a killer.

Hart's exhibition, billed as an installation, consists of seven, untitled, uniformly very large pastels, drawings technically. They are basically duotone: black and one other colour, though with enhancing touches of further colours within their tight tonal range. They seem photographically derived, or read that way.

Principally these relate one to close, intense, observation: extreme close-ups of what might be polyps, of a planet's surface (pitted and skin-like, palpably a surface—rather than a terrain or landscape), views of some undefineable part of what seems to be a furnace, a dead bull's head. With the bull we feel shocked—though the shapes and sharp silhouette are beautiful—and we feel a little intrusive.

In fact what most engages one, I think, is this sense of constantly adjusted focus—the pictures are *about* viewing, *about* the focal length, a pitiless or opportune spying. In this intimacy is the rightness of the show's title.

The pictures hold, and reward, and tease our gaze. There is an equalizing of the subjects—powerful forge, baroque dead bull, moon's surface, a pair of private, private hands, polyps (if that is what they are), all are one, or of one class, data perhaps. What is common is *our gaze*, and a kind of tentative incrimination. Curiosity. The guilt of our removal, of being beyond, has the pictures combine in a kind of incrimination, a reproach at

our privilege or power. They seem calculated to call forth, to somehow isolate, (to draw) and arraign, or make spectacle of, our detachment.

Hart's work is not, I think, discursive—rather, it is more that it is unerringly contemporary, putting its finger on some mood, experience or facet of the present we have hardly named.

Hart's manoeuvres also seem deliberated, tactical. His next big show, *North Star* (1996 at the EAF), combined all these factors— the psychological intensity, the usual detachment of the execution, and an increased air of paperchase, or *narrative*, about the mystery—together with the resources of the installation mode in a full gallery.

The last thing one saw in *North Star* was a pair of pictures on unstretched, slightly damaged-looking canvas. These were shaded from view by a kind of ice-flow arrangement of the EAF's then new moveable walls. From there one began the journey back, past the things already traversed, as if to put back the pieces, add up the clues. The imagery was on the one hand a picture of an old truck cabin with a figure or figures inside it, sketchily painted. Beside this was a diptych: illustrative images of slugs mating, and of some steely reflective machined parts. Unsettling. It gave the truck-cabin scenario a troubled, *Last Picture Show* or *Twin Peaks*-y inflection. At the far end of the gallery were two large (2.97 x 4.8m) photographic computer prints (on fine cotton) of the same image of a discarded black-and-white photocopy that had been screwed up and flattened out again, creases visible in the rather sumptuous reproduction. The photocopy was a photo taken at speed of passing trees and shrubbery, blurred with movement. It seemed evocative and emotional—an emotion that had perhaps been discarded, as too painful a memory (of happiness? unhappiness? fear?). Between these two sets of imagery the viewer journeyed, past a series of large monochrome panels, in different shades of olive green and grey green—almost like a wash or process applied to one and a factor slowing one down from immediate confrontation with either end of the gallery and their two, tensed pieces of data.

This literalism (straight-forward delay, baffle, obstacle) in the deployment of installation elements, and the almost classic 60s Minimalist use of materials—used to occupy volume, affect the space in a Euclidian way (think of Morris, Andre, Serra), are characteristic. There is none of the more recent fixation on the gendering of materials or tenuous, post-Eva Hesse informality.

Hart has shown elsewhere since *North Star*: group exhibitions here and interstate, a solo show at Melbourne's Stripp gallery and work done in collaboration—notably, in this last respect, the abstract 'bar-code' made with L.E. Young and shown on the parkland lawns in (Alan Cruickshank's 1997) *Obiter Dictum* project. A kind of psychic engine for Hart's work is probably his devotion to a continuing studio practice. Here he works very regularly, in a non-directed sort of way, mostly sorting and devising images (often of an unquantifiable psychic power for himself and of not immediately identifiable import, sometimes with the merest inkling that the thing in hand will even matter) or working with *materials* that intrigue: modifying found imagery and surfaces, collaging, remodelling, radically altering, obliterating, or rescuing, already made paintings. Works will coalesce slowly into seeming sequences—or drop out of focus, lose their promise—only to become, later, something else again.

Adelaide will next see Hart in collaboration with George Popperwell, another artist drawn to the shadowed and suppressed. An exhibition called *The Cloak Room*.