

Louise Haselton — *errand workshop*— at CACSA, Adelaide; July 22 to 28 August, 2011

by Ken Bolton

Louise Haselton showed at CACSA over July and August. It was some time since Adelaide had seen a full show from this artist whose work has exerted quite some influence in Adelaide over the last decade and whose teaching has exercised a liberatory effect locally, in sculpture particularly.

It is interesting to consider the nature of that influence. Though taught in Adelaide herself, Haselton does not come out of the lineage that has been most dominant here, at least intellectually. This latter tendency has seemed to me a lineage linking such disparate bodies of work as those of George Popperwell, Bronwyn Platten, Shaun Kirby, Paul Hoban and John Barbour—a shared orientation centering on objecthood, installation, otherness, and with a leaning towards the hidden, the psychologically-derived, the cryptic and mysterious.

Louise Haselton has worked independent of these interests as driving, determining factors. Her own take is not strictly opposed to any of those things, but is less moved by them *as ideas*. Her work for some time has been generated very much by feel for, sensitivity to materials and shape—and with an eye to oddness, to the object's own 'presence'. (Or should that be rephrased as 'own' presence? In any case there has been a lot of talk of "animism" in relation to Haselton's work—the term being supplied by the artist herself, in conversation with Michael Newall. It can be read in the interview with Newall that accompanied the exhibition's opening). But the Other as it exists in (or animates) Haselton's work is much less spookily human, less dark and secret than the other gang's other.

At the very least, Haselton seems less concerned to point up existential drama in relation to this real, imagined, divined or sensed otherness.

The resultant works are beautiful and quirky—without looking to play on quirky as a source of cuteness or too easy humour—and they can produce a kind of shiver ... of recognition or response. It is interesting, I think, that her works don't lead

too quickly to words, or generate a great many in response to them. The more we say about her pieces the more we put between them and ourselves, is my feeling.

A Louise Haselton object will normally be built around a binary: simple combinations, reliably counterintuitive and wrong-footing. This has been the case for some time. So stone and felt, wood and stone will be combined, but also stone and very ephemeral plastic. Is there shell involved in some cases? Haselton likes the organic, its mechanical logic (how limbs extend, reach, yearn), its balance and purposive look.

The quiddity of her objects attaches much less to the things' prior provenance—less than, say, with Barbour's objects. There is less emphasis on wearing, on agedness, on deformation, on dirt, dross, distress.

Haselton, less attracted to abraded surfaces, often responds to silhouette and shape, and to the organic, or to suggestions of the organic that a shape and texture might have. Though her work might harness binaries, the two poles are often not so dramatically clear, not so vastly removed from each other, as active agents. The achieved effect will be muted, but singular enough to gain the viewer's attention.

The first room of the CACSA gallery—not always easy to deal with for exhibitors—looked great. The eye was caught first and most lastingly by a shelf on the immediately facing wall. It ran a little below head height and had evenly spaced objects of strong silhouette. These looked like but were not in fact, stylized letter forms. It gave them a jokey, riddling aspect. (They recalled those letters that used to be made up of one or two gymnastic-looking figures, happily contorted. Haselton's pieces looked a little like code or hieroglyphs, as they 'cut capers' and cavorted cheerfully against the white of the wall.) Each combined slender, polished dark wood with a single, oddly matched material: a sawfish bill, in one case (making one 'arm' of the supposed 'Y'), small bronze trumpet shapes on another. Most were amusingly weighted, asymmetrically and tensely poised—as if performing tricks. These were 'Veto group 1'. Did the parts veto each other? They were standing on small cork feet or daises, an additional, humble oddity.

In the same room, with a typically Haselton title, was another piece, 'The good millionaire'. Made of rolled skeins of wool of different colours, bailed together, the title, I imagine, deriving from "millinery". Though who's to know?

What would have been the empty other end of the first room was adequately 'filled' by a mere screen, of hanging steel chain. Ovoid balls of aluminium studded each chain at generously spaced intervals. These 'baubles' were quite regular and with dimpled surfaces (casts of clumped walnuts, in fact). 'Invigilators' seemed to perform a relaxing 'exercise' to further psyche the viewer into Haselton's aesthetic: a taking pleasure in simple shapes and effects. In the final room an equivalent piece rounded out the room, a pair of stylized allusions to Greek pillars, wittily deco, wittily economical, and serving to forestall viewers eddying, lost, at the room's end.

There were further works in the 'veto' series in that end room. Series 2 played less with silhouette (and stood on a table in the midst of the room rather than against a wall). Each featured affixed to it one or more plastic drinking straws, of yellow, pink, or black. These were linear and silhouetted. But they were also odd as 'extensions' to the base material of each piece: the latter being variously shell, wooden goblets, coral in combination with mirrored perspex, unfired clay. The hardened coral creature was delicately ribbed and seemingly fragile and contrasted strongly with the dark perspex mirror on which it was borne. It resembled a large, white, overturned slater—beautiful rather than creepy—its ribbed or striated surface causing wonderful variegation within the white.

A regular aspect of Haselton's work's appeal is its ability to make a very subtly present quality strangely compelling. Vanilla can be the hero. A colour and shape (and Haselton does not resort to large size or curious miniaturism for effect) can be somehow mild, limp, by convention unassertive, weak—and yet it is as if the artist has managed to isolate and to distil this quality so that it becomes quietly distinctive and suddenly insistent in its ability to claim our attention. I am thinking here of the number of things Haselton has made that feature a blandly pale caramel, vanilla-ish baby-food colour—and have it rivettingly there and present and curiously appealing. This applies with the two 'Veto' series, and to a work called 'The new world' in CACSA's central room. A

series of interlinked hoops, but not quite rounded, not tubular so much as twiggily or intestinally organic—in the mildest, palest, stickily glossy fawn.

The artist has spoken of her living with the objects, pieces, materials for a good while as she works with them, or, *until* she works with them. This would seem to allow a much less urgent or forced discovery of properties, a much less forced attribution of character—and similarly with decisions to make combinations, to make certain contrasts or assists. Louise Haselton's pieces lead less directly to 'deep thoughts' in response, than to a sensitising and refreshing of the viewer's eye. You can suddenly feel more mentally 'limber' after looking at her work.

Haselton's manner suggests some comparison with Michele Nikou's art: there are some similarities of effect, a few similarities of procedure and inclination. But not a lot. There are similar things done by the younger artists around town sometimes, too: the fascination with slightly icky materials and their associations is one. But, again, Haselton seems less dependant upon those as strongly present or strongly operative, and in this is her originality.

In response to Newall's propositions to her as to influences and kindred artists in whom she might be interested, Haselton rejected Caro and David Smith ("casting, spatial arrangement, weight and balance" were the terms that Newall thought might suggest such artists). Haselton offered earlier artists, a less programmatic bunch, as closer to her: Calder, Brancusi, Noguchi, Gabo and Fausto Melotti. The immediate association with these, in contrasted with those Newall offers, is of "beautiful form"—and "playfulness", "wonder".

A common term behind some of *both* camps (Caro's small pieces for plinths and tables, some of Melotti's work) is Giacometti's table-top scenarios. But, like Melotti, Haselton is as far removed from Giacometti's preoccupation with tension and surreal theatre as she is from the concerns of sixties US modernism.

The exhibition title—*errand workshop*—is the only connection with an aspect of Haselton's earlier work that is suppressed in this show. That was for work that played with visual/verbal paradoxes. One suspects that the verb "err" is supposed to be evident within the title, as well as "work", "shop" and "workshop". And "errand" is such a deprecatory designation, simple and slightly junior in cast.

All a way of Haselton signalling the kinds of attention paid to the materials she works with—and lives with—to its dailiness, a way of keeping the head down. The achievement of the work is to have us focus on our response, remember the feel of it, the exact peculiar strength and kind of frisson that the materials and their combination produced. Ideas come later.