

Of Material Importance: a Louise Haselton profile 2002

by Ken Bolton

Ushered into the artist's living room, an open-planned space centering on and flowing around a sunken pit in which are divan, coffee table, chairs and cushions, I become increasingly apprehensive. I take in the restful décor of menthol carpet and ceiling, white walls and honey coloured woodwork. The hairdryer I can hear from the bathroom seems to be running a long time. Is Louise Haselton nervous about meeting me? Or am I a chore she is holding at bay just that little bit longer? At that moment Haselton appears and steps nimbly down the stairs to meet me. Her eyes are the legendary green that I hadn't expected them in reality to be. She smiles, vigorously fluffing her hair, looking at me through the fringe. "It's a bit boofy at the moment, but it will settle," she says disarmingly, and pulls her bare feet underneath her—to sit Buddha-style before me. She pours Japanese tea. I remark how neat the place is. "That's because I'm never here." Haselton indicates the wall that is chiefly window, against which a long trestle desk runs, the entire length of the L-shaped apartment. "Come on." She leads me there. A devastation of coffee cups, cigarette butts, pills, magazines, bottles and glasses, the remains of sandwiches that might form a lineage running well into the past week. This is more like it—and I feel a little selfconscious in my business skirt and heels. But Haselton seems to see no distance between us. Women friends had told me we would get on. Men, I expect, must find her enchanting. The long table bears a series of Haselton pieces—and what I take to be ideas or sketches for future works—and there are books and some student essays.

A month or so previously Louise Haselton showed at the Experimental Art Foundation (May/June 2003). *Small Crowd* was a lean body of work. It played an obdurate materiality off against the bubble-like abstraction of word and concept. The pieces were all, or nearly all, palindromes. It is a conundrum-like combination of the opposing quiddity of material and the abstraction of word: a bipolar rebus.

The result seemed jokily humorous, casual, affectionate—and, in their sequencing and ordering within the space, graceful. And canny: upturned plinths, and display boxes that were still grubby, insisted on an evanescent provisionality, a calm insouciance. It ‘felt’ like thought in that respect—its fluidity and mixture of tenuousness and definition. The occasional smudged and smeared white box support had the artfulness of a Robert Ryman as well as its factual ‘presence’. The elegance of the various pieces combined this deliberate facture and this same lightness of touch. The show definitely didn’t wish to invoke the term ‘heavy’. At the same time the combined works had the presence of a shared real, genuine fascination—a fascination with barely graspable connections (of object and concept, of reading and misreading and the echoes and reverberations of these). Was the high-placed “leper” a misspelled suicide? A “leaper”? No, it was the reverse of “repel”. Why were “moor” and “room” linked—“more room”? room for North Africans? room as ‘mooring’? Why did the latter pair’s manifestation physically, as yoked-together ‘tomes’, seem right—and more appropriate for the yoking’s not being fully achieved? Why did one forget the words at different times and focus on the physicality of the objects, unable, after a time, to tell what question our brains were asking? Cheshire cat-style the words interrogated us again.

A few pieces were less ‘verbal’. One consisted of a skipping rope whose handles were grips shaped by real hands, deep fissures moulded around real fingers. Another was the crude outline of an irregular five-pointed star. Each facet of the star was an index finger. They made a strong contrast with the word-related pieces in the show, powerfully uncanny in the shock of recognition they produced and weirdly unsettling in other ways, too. The skipping rope looked like jumper leads to me and the grips like charred, electrocuted hands. In any case the moulded-from-life looks like proof of life-gone-before, a *memento mori*. They speak of another; they dis-place us. The forefingers that might reach and point to the stars (the piece is mounted high so that we also look up and, because it is small, look closely) are here severed and joined to make up the object of attention. The initial recognition of these objects—as skipping rope, as star—and the recognition we make soon after, of the ‘idea’. are at a similar distance I think to that between concept and materiality in the palindrome series. Though these two works are more troubling, more threatening.

Finally came an easy sequence: a series of two-word phrases was presented on uniform plaques one word above, the other below. The presentation (one word in negative the other in positive) divided the words against each other revealing hedged-bets, wistful ironies and oxymorons—”almost exactly”, “unsung hero”, “loose fit”, “act natural”. “Small crowd”, the title of the show, appeared among them.

I think back to other Haselton shows I’ve seen. At first it can seem there are quite distinct bodies of work and distinctly different impulses in operation. There are artists Haselton keeps her eye on, but they seem not to be influences: Holzer, Nauman, Ruscha and, locally, one might propose a few names, but a very few and with little certainty. Haselton went through Art School at Underdale between 1987 and 91, helped along the way, she feels, by Fiona Hall, Max Lyle, Tony Bishop and George Popperwell. But her work doesn’t much resemble theirs. After a few years of the usual scuffle in Adelaide—teaching a little at Underdale, working at the Experimental Art Foundation, making art and exhibiting Haselton decamped to hussle in Canberra and then Melbourne. At RMIT she did a Masters—looking at the word in art and examining Hamilton-Finlay, Holzer, Nauman, and Robert Indiana. Formal study of what was her bent already. In 2003 she has been re-imported, to teach at her old art school.

A small Greenaway exhibition in 1992 consisted of three large, simple pieces. Each worked intriguing and formally striking variations on the materials—towels and blankets in every case, combined with steel, felt and other objects. The towels used were brightly printed and were screwed, twisted and generally flayed into shapes that made them initially unrecognizable. One piece had them appear as a blue pyramid of tinfoil-wrapped *Baci* chocolate shapes, against a contrasting ground. Another had a range of shapes cavort against its rich background. The aesthetic seemed to suggest both *Good Weekend*-style flair and design and the aesthetic of much of the Mediterranean: North African, Orthodox Greek and traditional Italian. The pieces seemed principally decorative, with their air of optimism and triumph to be read, perhaps, as connected with the materials' feminine and domestic origin.

A 1993 show at CACSA (*Five Different Homes*) was more thoroughly in a line that links to, and might ‘claim’, the skipping-rope and fingered star works. The

uncanny and idea-based, but physically looming and outré, characterized that show. At the time Louise Bourgeois was the name that suggested itself. Adelaide viewers might remember 'Trickle', a tower of white, fluffy-looking ball shapes in the corner of the CACSA's end room. Each ball had a kind of 'eye' to it, a small black disk (made in fact of feathers). The effect was jelly-ish and a tad icky. From this period—I think—comes a gigantic grey felt pillow with an outline brain appliqued onto it (to be seen permanently in the offices of the EAF along with one of her conceptually-bifurcated words: "Wrest" in speedy, sloped sans serif capitals—the energy the 'w' imparts to the word countered by the letters' being 3-D and covered in a pale, comfy-blanket material that suggested "rest"). Part of a 2001 show at the Greenaway Gallery was a 'family tree' of fingers (those of Haselton and her sister) cast in bronze and looking cruelly espaliered.

Louise Haselton is effortlessly different: a beginning in more or less *arte povera* assemblages; a front brain devoted to concept, that is often beguiled or ignited by the fascination with material: the moulding in wax and sometimes casting in bronze of the tactile and bodily; the literalist translation of idea (family tree) into presence through a hedge-like tree of fingers.

The long table in her studio groans under the weight of piled materials. The suggestibility Haselton is toying with and tapping now involves a large supply of heavy paper bags, docile yet capable of a purposive-seeming mystery, and corrugated cardboard, and lengths of balsa wood. The wood is almost diagrammatic in its thinness and suggestion of model, idea. And it is disarmingly unglamorous. And wax! The materials are going through their paces on the table, I see—frozen now and until I leave. The artist catches me looking at them..