

WHEN 'BAD ATTITUDE' BECOMES FORM 2003

by Ken Bolton

The 2002 piece "J.H. & P.R. commit atrocities against humanity" works a strategy of spoiling viewer fun with an editorial content at odds with the aesthetic enjoyment that the look of the work seems to promise and parody. It is a large horizontal painting with a regular wall- or wrapping-paper pattern (pink and cream flower, green leaves and stem). In front of the painting an old-fashioned chair stands, its cushion made of the same material. Twee good taste? Bad taste? Dated, certainly. It speaks of a false innocence. The legend across the bottom, a ribbon of words, repeating the painting's title a number of times, tells Australian viewers that Prime Minister John Howard and his Immigration Minister Philip Ruddock are guilty men. Not such a controversial view in art circles in Australia, though Aldo Iacobelli showed it at the only 'establishment' Adelaide art gallery, where that view might in fact have found some opposition.

Iacobelli is a thinking artist, reading widely and involved with ideas and events. But he is not normally seen as agit prop. And in fact the works from this phase employ this same formal strategy to explore a range of effects. Iacobelli has turned 'the art idea' over, over the years, as one might a rubik cube, trying different combinations, examining it in different lights, interested in where, philosophically & aesthetically, formal and iconographic moves might take him.

Iacobelli's distance and detachment from painting vary from one body of work to the next—the distance varying from near to far but never diminishing to the unappreciable, the kind of relation *to* or investment *in* the act of painting also varying. Some works offer beauty almost cynically so that it can be undercut, but they depend upon supplying the real thing none the less. "J.H and P.R. commit atrocities" is a case in point. "MM and CC lived in sin" or "Paul is a fucking liar" are made in the expectation of the beauty being alloyed by, inflected by, the twist the titles give but surviving it none the less. "Bill is a child molester" might, as a title, be more terminal in its effect—but perhaps the aesthetic hit is gauged so as to give pause. Does it stand-in for a willed innocence, or for the presumed

infantilism and damage borne by the perpetrator? We cannot know, but it does allow for the viewer's shock and allows time for the viewer to seek some accommodation of image and content—and to live uncomfortably with it. I think, for myself, that I'm not wild about these works, finding them rather blunt instruments: the deliberate crudity of the oppositions within the painting—harsh concept disrupting pretty ornament—are simple and forced. The ideas separate too easily from the pictures and the pictures themselves are not, thereafter, interesting to look at.

An earlier but related phase of Iacobelli's work was made much less of dramatic oppositions. The work of the late 1990s often dealt with not dissimilar pattern-style designs—and these evoked the ideal or aspirant nature of interior architectural decoration. (None carried any text.) In this phase the artist was less concerned to bomb the viewer's senses with an excess: the patterns are restrained, suggest walls and spaces beyond the works' limits, often do not fill the picture space (as the confrontational works regularly do), and are generally more tasteful—and, as fragments, they are more suggestive, sending the mind on its own journeys of reverie and imagination. By contrast the more recent phase is almost Op-art in mesmeric effect and more simple geometric design.

The tile-derived works gave pleasure in being artisanly made—all individually hand-traced, hand-painted and in being *not* tiles but representations of them. As representation (or even notionally a—very flat—illusionism) the work had huge ability to sustain any subjective association placed upon it—a transferral of aeons of personal, sightless thinking (or of mere consciousness) before countless walls and ceilings. Particular designs have associations with different gradations of taste and class, with different eras, different intentions and functions (official, public, the private space, the intimate, soothing, or cheerful, the more or less everyday). We can assume a like degree of care and association informed and guided the hand and judging eye of the artist.

Both phases work different ratios of the dilemma Johns and Warhol differently exploited (with the flag and map paintings in Johns' case, with the electric chairs, say or early portraits, in Warhol's): is it representation, is it abstraction? Variations on this, and on the figure/ground distinction, have powered much art since the 1960s and figure in perhaps most painting related to the literalist

essentialism of the period: Stella and Ryman in the 1960s, Germans like Polke, Richter and others in the 80s and 90s, Caulfield, Craig-Martin, Trevor Winkfield, Alex Katz. One could go on, indefinitely provoking with unlikely groups of names.

Iacobelli's oeuvre can be read as a prolonged puzzling over the function of art and artist and the binaries that are often held to be the choice available—though he refuses to choose or to enlist unequivocally on either side. Beauty, the ideal; art, or (by contrast) luxury good; the crafted valuable object or illusion and representation; critique, knowledge; dumb beauty and silent complicity with it; the artist as thinker or maker, critic or decorator. Iacobelli can live with all and all at once and his works would have us live with these contradictions too. The chair in front of the 'John Howard' painting bridges the space between us and it, invites us, perhaps, to 'get comfortable with it'.

Iacobelli's earliest painting, in the mid 1980s was interesting but read as licensed by (and lagging behind) the Transavantgarde manner of Cucchi and others: de Chiricoesque Italianate pillars and columns and smoke stacks, cannons. (Iacobelli had come from Italy to Australia with his family as a sixteen year old.) In retrospect these works are redeemed to a degree by the intellectual continuity they share with his later work. This highlights their examination of representations of power, their play with monumentality and their ambiguity as to the artist's critical relation to the imagery. These works were followed by some enormous charcoal drawings of cameras (a group show about image and power).

Subsequent shows consisted of paintings in twinned pairs: a depiction of gold and jewellery—'treasure' basically—looking enticing, but also venerable and nostalgic. It gazed back at the viewer reflecting the desire with which it was beheld, like hunter and hunted. Beside it hung the same subject matter depicted in white monochrome, a kind of negative, the objects discernible as forms combed or raked in the white pigment.

An extraordinary *jeu d'esprit* followed: an exhibition of very large square paintings each depicting a record—black filled the square canvas, the grooves raked concentrically about a coloured label at centre. The pictures looked extraordinarily cheery and unaccountably moody—or all too accountably: for each viewer a rose or purple or yellow label reminded of favoured and very

specific records of the past. One said to me "Ronettes" and I felt my sixteen year old heart in my chest. They also reprised hard-edge sixties painting and looked triumphant doing it. A subsequent exhibition showed tiny paintings in preserve bottles filled with oil—a joke about 'oils'—the oil additionally giving a heightening, magnifying effect to the enclosed colours and forms. Passé Duchampianism? Timely play on commodity?

In the nineties Iacobelli's work (regularly showing in Spain at Galeria Tomas March and in Australia) continued to look at political representations of the state and the ambiguities of the painted reproduction of flag, map, logo—and to watch with interest when technique or style, private and public, are put under pressure. The tile imagery, in part—just as with his first columns and tower-like chimneys—examines a Mediterranean heritage, partly foreign, partly familiar.

More recent shows continue to demonstrate continuities. What might be the key to Iacobelli is his unremitting thoughtfulness and watchfulness rather than devotion to propositional development. The continuities are often repetitions of imagery or a revisiting of the artist's personal image pool. An exhibition at BMG (in 2006) consisted principally of a group of identically-formatted large paintings. The thick, combed painting technique was employed again. This time the paintings were large, a little taller than they were wide & had regular stripes of colour running down them. They mimicked, very exactly, the patterns on bright, cheerful, woven Italian shopping bags—or the pressed-plastic moulded kind that *aped* this woven material. These seemed to me terrific paintings. They operated as incredibly cheering, soaringly beautiful hard-edge paintings that gained by their tongue-in-cheek homage to the rigour of sixties US formalism (they were flat, totally & unsentimentally systematic) and its combination with the evocation of wonderful Italian design. That the sources would be generic & 'cheap' bags made a nice contrast. The combing of the paint gave the required moulded/woven texture.

A more recent exhibition, *From time to time one talks to the moon* (at the Experimental Art Foundation, late 2007), though it didn't declare its hand in this regard, was an installation as much as an exhibition of more or less linked pieces & the pieces gained from this great attention to placement & lighting. It involved painted objects, wall-tile patterns, a large ceramic sculpture (reproducing, many

times magnified, a small cooking pot of a sort the artist's grandparents would have used). Nearly every piece was posited or offered so as to suggest associations with nature, childhood remembered, a remembered traditional domesticity, summer, Mediterranean culture. But again, images, techniques, memories revisited.