

Playful Magic, Dark Purpose—the art of Shaun Kirby

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by Ken Bolton

Shaun Kirby is one of the dark stars of the South Australian art scene, absent from Adelaide, for over a decade now, but showing at regular though too-long intervals. His exhibitions are eagerly awaited, relied upon to offer enormous surprise. Kirby has been influential locally, and is in some ways a distillation and best exemplar of his era's directions (more idiosyncratic but also better than most of his elders and peers) and for a good while his work was looked to with envy and interest by younger artists who were subsequent to Kirby's Adelaide period. To some degree these artists were his legacy. To some degree they had to fight against it, or come to terms with it, to differentiate themselves—tasks frustrated by Kirby's continual reinvention.

Shaun Kirby began exhibiting in the mid to late 1980s, in Adelaide—paintings full of a presentiment that was to do with narrative knowingness, a deliberate non-disclosure and an address that seemed as if made to some non-logical part of the viewer's being, an address that slipped under one's guard. These early works culminated in work he showed in a group exhibition (with Kerin Murray, Anna Platten and Bronwyn Platten) at the Adelaide Arts Festival in 1988, *The Image in Question*.

As with the earlier work the paint was handled in an impersonal style and drew on old media (popular prints, woodblocks, with their conventionally styled cross-hatching and modelling) and on imagery that derived mostly from the medieval and early modern periods or from the age of Victorian industrialism. The paint was flatly applied, the style of the visualisation was that of pedagogic illustration; the imagery itself was mysterious, in some cases violent or threatening. The presentation or marshalling of the imagery could be described as, variously,

theatrical or evidentiary. His two paintings in the *Image in Question* were very large, shaped canvases, one a triptych, the other more or less cruciform.

The better known of these paintings had an image of a 'bucket of blood' flanked symmetrically on either side by identical containers covered in cloth. The colours were flat and unmodulated: crimson blood against deep grey bucket, all on a blue ground; the material-covered objects were a warm biscuity shade. The painting was dramatic, though one didn't know what it meant.

Works from that show by Kirby and Bronwyn Platten, were immediately chosen to be exhibited in the AGNSW's then annual showcase of 'new national talent', *Perspecta*, for the year to follow. But Kirby turned his back on painting. He had come from a sculptural and conceptualist background and felt freer working within it, despite painting's far greater commercial viability. This was partly an Adelaide inflection: the more cerebral, conceptual and inventive stimulus—whatever medium the students in question were majoring in at South Australia's main art school—was traceable to that institution's sculpture department which favoured a kind of associative, anti-rational/anti-rationalist art of assemblage and installation. It might also have reflected the lack of a strong commercial gallery scene in the city—and the subsequently reduced temptation to aim for cash reward. It manifested then, as it does to this day, as a high-minded rejection of art's serving a decorative, luxury function.

A funny thing had happened to "the New" as it existed in Adelaide. A few years before it had centred around power and gender issues. This mutated to an interest in "the image" and in foregrounding styles (or rhetorics) of presentation, and in genre associations, and degrees and kinds of (inherent) narrativity. Epistemes were revealed, or were seen to clash, prevail or become "problematic". Kirby was part of an art that was cerebral but poetic, not particularly interested in being rational or discursive but which was made by rational minds interested in the *fascination* of the irrational and in its claims to "sense".

Kirby's first solo exhibition after *The Image in Question* (Experimental Art Foundation) was *Cultic Gloss* (at the Contemporary Art Centre of South Australia) in 1992.

It was a very good show. Kirby's exhibition had to meet high expectations. And I think it did meet them and raised the bar even further, though at the time, I am embarrassed to say, I was critical of aspects of the show, not ready to follow where Kirby's work led, and disappointed at the move from painting (or from the kind of paintings Kirby had done, at least). As well, in the mixed medium of sculpture and installation, Kirby's tone was much more evidently and deliberately varied, ranging from the (seemingly) solemn to the rather cynically cryptic, mordant, bitter and jokey—as if Beckett were blended with Joseph Beuys. I liked the show—but I had reservations that seem to me now meaningless. Actually, they speak of my own affront at an intelligence much more mobile than my own. I remember every bit of the exhibition well and all its pieces seem to be benchmarks against which I now often judge work by others, forgetting my initial hostility and puzzlement.

Kirby's work at this stage might be described as having a Minimalist-purist sensibility while working—by conceptual inclination—in the impure mode or field: assemblage. That is, literal(ist) dumb matter, sometimes with an almost art povera emphasis on materiality, and yet with a tendency to think allegorically. Allegory of course is seen as typically 'impure' and postmodern. *Purism*—as distinct from purist taste—is typically modernist. ('Taste' itself being neither here nor there.)

The work dealt with a content that was driven by metaphor, irony, by allegory even (as that term is employed in the visual arts). It consisted of logical quasi linguistic propositions and had the look of syllogistic equations, formulations (or 'arrangements') of objects and images. As in the past these included Joycean/Beckettian humour and concerns: that is, richly verbal and blackly reductivist—yet remaining, whether negatively or positively, *humanist*. Not American-style Greenbergian formalism but attitudes and reference points that mark a continuity between continental modernism and (continental particularly) post modernism. Beuys was the obvious reference to make, to mark out something of the territory within which I think Kirby then worked. Later work suggested for a time Richter and Polke.

Meaning's *mechanisms* here were theatrical, yet visual presence on occasion

won out. Like a stylish round-head, Design sometimes closed Theatre out. A quality of inarticulateness and understatement has been a feature Kirby favoured from this point on. This has been manifested partly through the works' humour—a deliberately stumble-bum inadequacy of expression, or a muffled, pregnant-with-meaning quality, have given some works a sort of centripetal heaviness or weight and have managed to suggest, not at all vaguely, the vague, inchoate and incommensurable, the mysterious, ambiguous and equivocal. Work that is exactly and precisely vague.

Though it was sculpture, half the pieces were two-dimensional rather than free-standing. They hung on the wall like pictures (one was a photo and many contain photographic images on or against a ground that was always rectangular and sometimes framed). So, technically sculpture, but rather unsculptural—not to do with mass, volume, physicality or with the manner of its making. Nor were these works especially inviting of inspection from any but preferred points of view: typically they stood backed against a wall or into a corner, only one was free-standing. They were image-arrangements, slightly pictorial and somewhat like poetic equations: this-placed-beside-this arrangements that produced puzzle, enigma or a nagging sense of pun.

Generally the work in *Cultic Gloss* was hermetic and obscure: an unerring formalism applied to themes stoically and bleakly humanist. It was possible then to see Kirby as a strangely unengaged, nihilistic or pessimistic end-game modernist. The observations were "mordant" but the works hardly chuckled or cared much. One untitled piece consisted of an exquisitely mounted photo (moodily dark and partial) of what could be made out to be the top of a skull seated on an ancient book. The skull lid had suture marks (that enabled it to be identified *as* a skull) and the book had visually rhyming—i.e., *similar looking*—holes in it, as if the pages were being eaten or were rotting. Life, culture, learning—all rotting and mortal? Was this an insight or an attitude?

"Cathedral" consisted of a creamy white cone standing on one end of a low, narrow, metre-long, black velvet box. It was visually pretty sharp and reminded me of Rauschenberg's "Empire" and also, less explicably, of Venice and witches, and Commedia dell' Arte figures—maybe via Tiepolo drawings and Goya prints. Plus the Ku Klux Klan. But the title said it all. The cone stood for that: the white

pinnacle—of aspirations and twisted dreams and religious ideas—built on the nothingness, possibly, of the funereal black box. All those artisans, generations of them, giving their lives to a Cathedral. The cream cone was of thin, soft, *organic* latex. Ah, humanity! I doubt the work makes these meanings available exactly. Perhaps they're *not* meanings so much as examples of the work's formal and associative coherence, and of its power to absorb readings and response.

Shaun Kirby was one of a number of artists of his generation who constituted an unprecedented wave of talent in Adelaide at the end of the 1980s and in the early 1990s. Kirby's work, though, was of especial interest to all his peers and has remained so. A sure sign that he was one for critics and a larger public to watch. He took part successfully in a number of group shows and showed solo again some time later (1995) at the small Sym Choon Gallery—an exhibition entitled *Old Dust & Medical Gas*.

By this time the constant in Kirby's work looked to be various kinds of enigma and mystery wedded to a strong material presence that seemed to hide, almost as a secret sorrow, its causes or meanings. In this it mimicked psychological baffles, blocks, neuroses and screen memories—a protective or obscuring metonymical grab at what is not-quite-the-point but which stands in some approximation to it and is less painful to behold or reveal. (He-went-that-a-way, says the work to the viewer.) The work from this time manifests a poverty of appearance that is rather classic and austere. At the same time each piece seemed a rebus punningly derived from tantalisingly unguessable verbal formulae. Here, while the detail might resist the interpretation it invited, still, the work cut recognisable intellectual or symbolic silhouettes: the Freudian, the Oedipal, time and memory.

One piece brought the viewer back to instances of intensely lived but lost childhood: sticking from the wall at exactly eye-level a run-way strip of chequered linoleum kitchen flooring and the sort of dragster-styled car a boy might spend ours with in solitary playing and noise-making fantasy—its tiny front wheels in the air, rear wheels spinning, a ridiculously ghoulish figure (bug-eyed, tongue drooling) at the wheel. There were old photos of extraordinary melancholy effect. A figure—suggested by riding coat and long boots etc—and with a riding crop, placed beside clear plastic sheeting on which were depicted the rails of a horse

jump. It seemed to insist (from the past) that we attempt the jump, yet it was upended, as though it had itself failed its own test. 'Headless', the figure and scene suggested an inversion of parental authority and impregnability. Another piece was rather hilarious. A small child's cotton or terry-towelling jump-suit, pink, hangs from a projecting beam in the stairwell between the gallery's levels.. The shadow it cast on the wall resembled a gallows image. On the back of the little suit, in white copperplate lettering was embroidered

I'm not a charlatan

He's a charlatan

He hates me.

It is an emblem of tiny rage and frustration—of the powerless son? of artist towards critic? There was more of course. Where earlier shows might have had standing behind them Joyce and Beckett this body of work had perhaps Trevor Winkfield and Raymond Roussel. Individual titles were supplied ('The Horse Father (Ten Hands High)', 'German Tailor's Scissors', 'Elapsed Time', 'The Kundmangasse House') but they weren't assigned to specific pieces—attribution was left to the viewer. The following acrostic poem was my catalogue essay for the *Old Gas* show at its later first showing outside Adelaide. It gives some idea of the fun the work generated for viewers.

Shaun Kirby, Deep Farceur

"A racehorse, isn't it?" — Adam Cullen

*"A writer of the serious, or 'intellectual', farce?"
— Susan Norrie*

*"Arise, Sir Mice!"
Ben Jonson, **One-Eyed Jacks***

Since the mid eighties Shaun Kirby's work has changed a lot—though it coheres mightily and its coherence

Has much the ‘appearance’ of a densely fortress-like structure,

A castellated, buttressed siege building, a forest of tall and closely packed firs, or the ‘castle’ perhaps of a Coney Island.

Unlike much difficult art—though exactly like much of the best—

Neither fun nor profundity is absent from Kirby’s pieces. Some are funny ‘even’—sure—some are affectingly tragic or stare *at* tragedy as if ‘with’ us. (Insisting, “Look!”) The

Key to Kirby’s works—and this is not a key so much as a formulation of mine that expresses only the kind of my bafflement before them—

Is that they have the feel of screen memories about to be cracked (a sudden insight, we feel, will explain them to us) or at least see them

Revealed *as* such. “Screen memory” is a Freudian term for a recurrent memory the subconscious throws up, to hide, substitute or *go decoy for* memories that must not reach consciousness.

Because, Kirby’s rebus-like pieces (sometimes bristling with clues, in a seemingly text-like charade—or at other times un-

Yieldingly minimal—opaque, confrontingly dead-pan, denying yet grinningly confident of our return)

Describe or emulate *the morphology* of thought and understanding: its fumbling, convulsive manner, at one moment stymied at the next naming an

Equation that had not been apparent or that loomed like an accident about to happen, an uncle one shouldn’t mention yet who

Even as we lowered our eyes cleared his throat— *and then* “It’s Uncle

Pete!” A gasp from the conscious mind when we wake up but *here*, asleep, Pete seems completely, now, one of the family.

Firmly Pete nods and tells the story that it is as if he has been telling, and re-telling, for ages: he is in a carriage, the scenery rocketing comfortably by, jawing to a stranger when the stranger’s eyes light up

at something innocuous Pete has said, with “*a wild surmise*”. This is clearly a ‘literary’ phrase and events seem to pause—the wide eyes of the auditor looking on—while Pete considers it—only to be woken by the conductor pulling at his sleeve: *wild mice, sir* the porter is telling him, have been swarming across the tracks so that the train has slowed and will be arriving late.

At once the screen memory, the image of Pete’s sister, our Auntie Esther, saying “Perestroika”, or discussing the Petrov scandal, or something similar (which

Reliably ended the dream at all times before— *our* dream, not Pete’s), presses its

Cheek against the window of our train of thought, head turned from us who are the assembled clues who long had gathered to break this case—

Esther, we thought, was one of us. But she had held steadily to the key. Bereft of it she stares

Unhelpfully at the landscape that rushes by in the dark outside. How can art be like this?

R—the letter that begins this line, unhelpfully—like Esther—is no help. Merely interrupts. *How can art be like this, in the gallery’s bright light?* That is its talent—in the master’s hands.

Kirby's art from this point on has seemed less Viennese or Freudian. It remains psychologically suggestive and interested in 'psychology' but seems less weighted towards the period flavour of *mittel europa*. Kirby's method has become also much less design-related and more forthrightly punkish or direct, and, often, grungey, less concerned to be elegant. The work seems more genuinely meant, too, where *Cultic Gloss*, say, might have seemed to be fencing with not entirely dangerous or potent targets.

International Headache Congress (shown at the Experimental Art Foundation in April/May, 1996) was another tour de force. A vast number of black biros bearing the show's title on their sides in gold copperplate were stuck, porcupine-fashion,

into a saw horse. At the end of the gallery an enormous cloud of cotton material was held in place by a very crudely built scaffolding of wooden pieces. This one only saw when one walked behind—to find this deliberately desperate-looking gesture, an allusion to shoddy artifice. The material had a design printed on it that suggested "underpants". The effect (of grandeur, and inanity, and futility) was to produce sniggers. An antiseptic and unsexy penis-shaped object elsewhere was cushioned on a weird pillow of industrial foam. None could explain the installation satisfactorily, but it was a knockout: almost thrillingly absurd.

The Gasfitter—also at the Experimental Art Foundation—followed (in late 2000). More than other of Kirby's Adelaide exhibitions this seemed a single, staged event, a unity—not an exhibition of separate, if cohering, pieces. And the gallery space registered as a little emptier than is usual with Kirby's work. Other of his shows have contained less, physically, but *Gasfitter*, more or less a single gesture, or gestalt, designed to fill the gallery, didn't quite manage to do so.

The Gasfitter (at the EAF, in 2000) introduced the viewer to a curving structure of industrial, translucent plastic and lightweight lumber. It had the character of a building site, the same air of purposiveness. This structure differed as a simulation (or stage set) might differ from the real thing: this was clean, and lacked scars and abrasions.

The installation led one to a number of photos at certain junctures. These showed shadowy scenes of the interiors of abandoned buildings: the first of an alleyway between factory or warehouse buildings, with rubbish strewn about, windows boarded up—suggesting decay, but also the pause before repair or final demolition—a holding-state pending a move either way. A good site for a mugging. The next picture, which on entry one saw on the right, showed a factory table, again abandoned, with the stains of chemicals, fire, rust—a look as of heavy industrial spills and temperatures. It was characteristically Kirby in looking mysterious, threatening, moody—and also in amusedly and openly appropriating a look that said Heavy, High-European, Meaningful—the combination of fat and iron and rust that says Beuys, Kiefer.

The viewer followed the curve of the wood and plastic and was funnelled into the larger gallery space—to confront a vast, angular and stylized wrought-iron spider in the far gallery corner.

What the exhibition seemed to do was offer *the funky, the real, the textured* (rough, greasy, dark, dank, corroded)—*always through photographic illusion*. It married this to an *in-situ* simulation that was, by contrast, deliberately sterile, denuded of the marks and signs of authenticity, literalness and immediacy. The building-site construction was of clean, distinctly un-distressed plastic and light wooden beams. One's progress into the gallery (echoing the alleyway in the first photo—a right hand turn into a cul-de-sac) was clear sailing: a relatively few visual elements that led to a rather antiseptic joke spider. The spider had some real presence—for a moment or two—that translated then fairly permanently to jokey deflation.

It was an interesting tack: the anaesthetic withholding of the gritty and mysterious *real*, that was 'posited', while 'reality effects' were confined to the fictive, illusionistic space of the photographic images. A kind of mildly sadistic toying with expectations that the show set up: material presence becoming a kind of absence. A conceptual reversal, interesting in the abstract, but not so interesting as an art experience.

Kirby undertook further study in the Netherlands in the late 1990s. Subsequently, and for some time, the artist worked for a company bringing art-trained thinker-makers to problems of design and installation for the commercial world: designing shop, gallery and display fittings and arrangements and supervising their building. It paid Kirby's bills but took him away from art-practice a little. He returned to it more fully after a few years out of the art scene, with the 2004 exhibition *Human Weeds* at CACSA.

Again this was installation—and the themes seemed to be those of confrontations with 'otherness', (and) with inchoate but powerful drives and repressions. There were photographic images of sterile building interiors. These suggested old mad-houses, hospitals and extermination camps, a grim and utilitarian industrialised cruelty. A large table of waffle-surfaced foam featured a small figure bowling confidently along towards one: a comically confident little

tyro, but also a (comically) threatening outsider-figure, slightly piratical. Most powerful were very large colour photographs of what looked like empty bus shelters in uninteresting, empty outer-suburban countryside. Attaching to each of these photos were ochre, clay-coloured umbilical cords—galvanizing arcs that jumped between the photo and the gallery floor. A palpable energy seemed to run through them. They were unpleasantly organic and naked, obscene against the antiseptic images and between the clean surfaces of photo and floor.

Another piece consisted of a large funnel shape on four metal legs in the corner of the gallery. It might have been for directing grain from one container to another. The larger end was filled, not open, and attached to its face was a strange and old photo. It showed a kind of Enid Blyton 'Noddy' doll as a policeman, like an English bobby, maybe ten inches high, standing in Australian bush grass beside a rabbit burrow. The rabbit had appeared. Officer Noddy was staring testily at the rabbit's head, which, from its hole three inches away, looked back at the wooden figure. It seemed an amusing confrontation between instinctual life (the real rabbit) and the repressive arm of the Law. The other, narrowed end of this metal funnel was a kind of vagina or anus and faced back into the corner of the room. It was low down, and one either walked away or, if you didn't take your dignity too seriously, bent down to look—which felt very odd. A kind of pump hung from it. It could suggest some horrible treatment to be administered to a farm animal, or that you were looking up its bum, or looking up the rabbit's burrow—at *its* bum. You were surely in trouble with the policeman, at any rate. The work is a joke and a serious proposition at the same time. At one end of the object you are a spectator looking at an exchange of glances. At the other you are a spectacle yourself, as you look... well, wherever it is you *are* looking.

There were other aspects to the exhibition. Typically, the large photographic images (the 'bus-shelters')—though nothing in the show supplies this 'meaning', which is unavailable and is *not* therefore 'the meaning', but is arguably the source of these images' power—show zones outside Amsterdam where drive-by prostitution is tolerated. These are called 'comfort zones'. Kirby was (no doubt) attracted to the images as revealing liberal attitudes, a sanitary tolerance, but revealing at the same time a puritanism protected *by* this device, a denial of the human, etcetera. (The women are most often immigrant women, Albanian, North

African, not Dutch.) I give this privileged information as an example of the artist's quite private working methods. Kirby relies on his own relation to chosen imagery to suggest and license what he then does with it. He does not intend that it must disclose the significance which it has for him: he trusts it, though, to maintain the power he sees in it or invests in it. This is the most important continuity running through all Kirby's work so far. And it means that cumulatively his exhibitions, his oeuvre, has gained in resonance from one show to the next: his most loyal audience often know what he means but don't know *why* they know.