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AN UNPOPULAR ART: SIGNS OF THINGS TO COME — 1993

by Ken Bolton

“Possible Clouds”—Bronwyn Platten with Cecelia Clarke—Experimental Art Foundation; February 12—March 14. 1993

Bronwyn Platten’s current exhibition is further evidence of one stream of influence from the University of South Australia coming increasingly to constitute what will be seen in the 90s as characteristic Adelaide style. Not characteristic of the bulk of Adelaide art, or even of the bulk coming from the Art School, but characteristic of that seriously committed group to whom the terms *avant-garde* and *experimental* would once have been applied.

It is a body of work which, along with that of some other individual talents, will garner reputations—and to some extent audience—beyond the gravitational pull of Adelaide. Adelaide will bask or shirk under the image that they bring our artwork—just as when, in the past, “Adelaide art” meant ocker funk, or performance or post-object, Hans Heysen or, indeed, as in mid century, left liberal surrealist art.

If this comes to pass it will mean a serious-toned, cerebral, hermetic or obscure art and at the same time an art that is by turns lyrical, discursive and allegorical or metaphor-driven. Will Adelaide art, then, come to summon effortlessly the phrase “anagogic propositional”? Who can doubt it?

But such adjectives—as well as *serious-toned*, *cerebral* etc—might attach to it. It’s not formalist—and has no one particular style. If we consider the recent artists that might fall under whatever the rubric will be—“anagogic propositional”, for journalistic reasons, is not a contender—they being Shaun Kirby, Bronia Iwanczak, L.E. Young, George Popperwell, John Barbour, even Hewson/Walker—none of these has, as a matter of *concern*, a style; none are

attached even to a single medium. Hewson/Walker can seem an exception: they deal fairly exclusively in image and text, but their handling of them is rarely expressively personalized and consistency of appearance is less an achieved style than it is procedural consistency.

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Hewson/Walker's subject is the poetic, the poetic by which various discourses move or impress or—pleasurably—subjugate us: they are by turns analytic and mimetic of these rhetorics or poetics. Some of Anton Hart's work could be similarly characterized. David O'Halloran works with far cooler poetics and rhetorics—those of institutionalized design and sign—to offer light, but to my mind still too heavy, ironies about the already ironized.

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Bronwyn Platten is of this group—with some others, at the more poetic, less analytic end of its spectrum, and less concerned to analyse the poetic than to *work with* a poetics of buried but felt connection. Her best remembered work in the public mind to date is probably painting—and one is hanging now in the State Gallery.

The artist has in fact returned to assemblage and installation (the favored mode of the group I am identifying), working this way for some time. Platten has not been exhibiting at all frequently and has in any case had a year overseas. The resulting exhibition, *Possible Clouds*, is a series of works of real density, not linked closely in time or by a worked-up thematic consistency.

There is consistency, but it does not consist of permutations and the ringing of changes. *Possible Clouds* deals in articulation and the inarticulate, as counterweight to each other. Through much of the show the tongue figures, and, by various extensions, speech, the rational, the mind, and culture. The

tongue, here, is a double-sided coin and is also invoked as physical (as the body, the in-articulate) and as knowledges, intuitions, desires that are felt yet not assimilated, that contradict or resist rational processing: the tongue-body as unknown to itself, the strange car we all drive with no manual.

Platten presents objects, constellations of objects and images, that embody these dichotomies, that bind them as troubled, troubling, contradictory pairs. Nature is presented as both “out there”, and as ourselves; nature, the body, are proposed as process—and culture and its concepts as, by contrast, static and faultily ideal.

We identify as both target and hunter/predator in meeting one piece—at a level that is less one of recognition and assent than of being forcibly enlisted.

Throughout many of the works there is a sense of the liquid, of moisture, of fluids—and of desires, motivations and the involuntary as having a largely fluid, impulsive existence—governed *by*, and pressing *against*, the dry notions and permitted agendas of social functioning.

This constellation of artists does not produce popular art. Yet it is often—despite the opacity that will make it unpopular—art of very definite presence: we sense connections that are real yet unspoken, that are represented more, really, for *not* being spoken: we sense we are responding to them, in Bronwyn Platten’s case, with the inarticulate part of our selves leading the articulate nervously in its wake. This real curiousness makes a viewing of *Possible Clouds* oddly memorable.