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## **Dark Star 1992**

**by Ken Bolton**

review of Recent Work by George Popperwell—Contemporary Art Centre;  
October 23—November 15, 1992.

For as long as I've been in Adelaide—over ten years now—a high proportion of the more interesting graduates from Underdale have cited George Popperwell as the most important influence on them while at art school. It's a major tribute to Popperwell as teacher and partisan of developing thought—because he has not perpetrated a house style: these testimonials have come from painters *and* performance artists—as well as from sculptors and installation artists, the areas in which Popperwell himself works. It is possible that Popperwell has kept his own art under a bushel—it has had minimal public exhibition—or that he has not been greatly productive of finished work.

Interestingly he has chosen in this first exhibition not to give a resumé of the last decade or so's artistic rumination and production—which could have been interesting but perhaps seemed rather inevitable and likely to have given the effect of closing off a career—a retrospective, after all. Instead he has produced totally new work that is contemporary in feel and runs no risk of dating the artist or painting him as out-of-touch, reclusive, or eccentrically if intriguingly far removed from present accents and concerns, a hallowed elder.

Well, the show is elegant and economical—both visually and rhetorically—and has a sense of sureness and confidence in its placement and ability to make reference and to call up and control associations. On the other hand, while it has an air of sharpness about it (which is pleasing—much evocative installation reminds me of charades where the art will fall over itself to endorse any reading out of gratitude for even *mis*-recognition) still it does not deal for the most part in anything like declarative sentences.

The exhibition is a series of installations, linked thematically, and linked by style—blacks, greys and whites—and by ‘materials’—office furniture, black and white tone drop-out photographic imagery (that recalls film and advertising, and a 90s eye for the look of the past). The thematic unity is that the pieces seem to treat Life (life with a rather capital “L”) and Time (less capitalized), and life crises or rites of passage—travel/change, sex/romance, death. And perhaps the theme underlying these is one of the repression of the urgently impersonal (the sexual, the body, anxiety) beneath the social.

To me—and assuming I have identified these themes correctly—this seemed rather romantic and banal but interestingly revived by the sharp, crisp treatment. A large tile-and-wood construction suggested cremation, phallic penetration, incinerators and toilet tiles. Machismo, nihilist, French hysteria for my money, and depressing. The show’s tone falters once or twice: some pillows and a photo of sexy wild horses hidden in the filing cabinets seemed to me sort of silly in the first case, corny in the second (though here maybe deliberately) and a break with the overall style of the rest.

What more is there to say in this space?—only that the exhibition will have its effect on most viewers and should be seen; it places Popperwell securely among some other artists working in Adelaide and cuts rather a dash among them. John Barbour, Kate Brennan, Hewson/Walker, Shaun Kirby and others have sometimes seemed anomalous as Adelaide practitioners. But as their ranks swell they can seem, rather more, to be an aesthetic push themselves—though not bound by manifestos or strict principles. Popperwell might be for the public a major dark star now made visible.