

MARK SIEBERT: GAUCHE PRAISES COOL

by Ken Bolton

'Poetry and Paydays'—Mark Siebert, Greenaway Gallery; March 16—
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Mark Siebert's work is characterised by provocation and coat-trailing, and by a focus on conceptions of art and value. Consider his work to date. There is the 2007 Downtown exhibition *Fan Letters* (not to go too far back). In this instance the fan's ordinariness and the star's untouchable glamour are crucial elements. They make an essential binary: the two things maintain each other. In the exhibited letters Siebert attempts to celebrate, but more importantly to define or isolate, some essence of the particular musician's oeuvre—or of the aesthetic to which the artist subscribes. The deliberate and amusing ineptitude of these celebrations, of these definitions, enacts that divide between artist and fan. The major, though unacknowledged move each letter makes is to touch the recording star: the Siebert persona will claim an equivalence, a familiarity with the star addressed, will insist that their meeting, their conversing as more or less equals is imaginable. The letters then go on to imagine that scenario. Badly typed (anachronistically, you might think), words overtyped with Xs, and with corrections, typos, hand corrections—the letters praise and admire, but offer also advice and criticism, they offer adulation with caveats and reservations. Thus the fan/star gap is bridged, the tension defused, the terms conflated or collapsed. What price the ideal?

Siebert's proposals are tendered at one level sincerely, at another as tongue in cheek. The purpose, or the effect, is to test our own identifications and reservations, to bring them into play—presenting a difficulty, pushing impossibly for resolution: comic impasse, comic dilemma, for some people an irritation.

The recording star's imagined horror and distaste at this lapse supplies some of the humour here. The writer's comic hubris itself represents a storming, an envisioned storming, of the ideal. It may be amusingly Quixotic, but *if* it is Quixotic then it partakes, too, of idealism, of 'greatness'. We can't doubt, either, that this is also part of the work's mission—an apprehension or statement of something abstract, ideal, an approach to the condition terrific music confers. The listener, too, can be cool, great.

These are very early 19th-century, Romantic conceptions, miniaturised (?) made bathetic (?)—or merely democratised—by being instanced through rock n roll and pop music. We will be aware that this is High Art's institutional perspective—even if we do not share it. (Maybe this registration of 'bathos' is High Art's *reserve* position.) For Siebert's purposes our recognition of discrepancy is enough. In any case Siebert's ostensible persona can live with many contradictions. Just as we do, is the implication.

Mark Siebert's 2008 Greenaway exhibition, *Apples*, was in a way quite perfect—a hymn to cool music and the new listening technology. And its enactment of this act of aesthetic faith was self-consciously nerdy and innocent. We could either approve, or approve with ironic reservation. Its centre-piece was a life-sized model of himself—of the artist-as-fan lying in state under glass, dressed in a cherished Velvet Underground t-shirt, an ipod clutched to his chest, head-phones on, his face beatific, relaxed. Paradise achieved.

The paintings that fleshed out that show were formatted like (i.e., they 'referenced') current bus-shelter size advertisements, deliberately just a little daggy and artisanal—so as not to be passed over as slick advertising and so as to emphasize idea over execution.

Siebert's next, *Forever 27*—at AEAF in 2009—also dealt in hero recording stars, all of whom had died at twenty-seven? Was that it? This was Siebert's (approximate) age at the time. The opening included

Siebert's claiming rock-star equivalence with the angry performance of a loud, amplified song. (The artist accompanied himself on electric guitar and, with his minder and body-guard, stormed out immediately he hit the last note: *the star must not touch the audience.*)

The tribute depictions that made up the exhibition were perhaps not strong enough technically to state the idea clearly from one piece to the next—though as a body perhaps they did. It seemed not a strong show, to me.

Siebert is precise, where the usual mode of much Adelaide art is imprecise and vague allegory, imprecise and vague metaphor or metonymy: endless meaning claimed but unearned; distinctly un-summoned 'themes' standing boringly and inevitably in the wings, like barely willing extras on a movie set, dubious of the lighting and askance at the script. The content is a cliché. In Siebert's case the *subject* is a cliché—the irony-tinctured content is not.

Since the Greenaway and AEAF exhibitions of a year or more ago we have seen in CACSA's *New New* survey (in late 2010) a DVD film of the-artist-going-to-perdition, drinking himself to death and ruin—or to purgative apprehensions of an absolute, an ideal, an ur-truth—in the bars of the seedy East. Or the seedy bars of the East. A cliché, of course—of Rimbaud, of Graham Greene, of Mr Kurtz?—and its being distinctly invoked and only indistinctly or approximately evoked is again intentional. We see Siebert playing chess, a hand regularly picking up the glass and drinking, drinking. Almost like a discipline, right?

The themes are the usual—of art, the absolute, truth and abjection, idealism and the material world's gravity. (Do his contemporaries remember the Downtown show that featured Siebert's documentation of book-burning? It showed potboilers being burned, but also some sacred cows of French theory—and book-burning anyway carries with it associations from the Nazi era. Tr-roublesome!)

Siebert's current show promised to deal similarly with concepts of the artist and with the contradictions they contain. Art. Is it a calling, a vocation, a job? a gamble, a delusion, a confidence trick? Did Rilke *have* to write so many letters? (And he was a success story!) Must you toady for money? Does the system depend upon the failure of the many? Can you, come to think of it, spare a dime? Buddy? M'am? Cool!

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In fact, *Poetry and Paydays* consists of a group of four or so largish paintings—plus a few (approximately A-4) pictures—and a host of smaller, micro paintings: these last generally painted on the back of cigarette packages, carefully unfolded, the result affixed to a backing surface and framed. These looked like small collages, a la Schwitters or (much-shrunken) Rauschenberg, and each showed the screen of a phone with its texted message. The larger pictures showed the screen of a computer—with email open and, centrally, the text. As realism the painting was deliberately inept. The messages were appeals for money, excuses given about non-payment of debt, and calls for assistance—all directed to a few friends or, most commonly, to the artist's mother.

Part of the exhibition was a small book—*Poetry and pay-days*—which offered itself, without much attempt at plausibility, as a kind of journal comprised of similar missives. These recorded the need to scrounge cigarettes, paint and materials, to borrow someone's camera, go to openings and be seen, and to beg for, or explain the non-payment of, money. They were interlaced with the occasional moment of celebration, or of invective delivered regarding some rival's exhibition, or praise for yet another's "excellent" showing. Sort of amusing. People liked the exhibition. I liked it too.

A perspex box on an upturned plinth enabled the willing—friends, the gullible, the fun-loving, the artist's mother?—to drop in a donation towards Siebert's ongoing *vie boheme*. On opening night coins could be heard regularly rattling into the coffers. The screenwork, shown rather small at Greenaway, reprised again the gambling, chess-playing, steadily imbibing

hand of the artist—killing time, killing hope, dreaming. But at this size, and rather hidden away, it had little impact. There were also some amusing photographs of Siebert, standing, begging, in London. One doubts he did it longer than was necessary for the photographs, but who knows—perhaps he was raking it in?

The overall ploy the show enacts might be a relative of Romantic Irony, the irony achieved here through bathos particularly. (Can we envisage, for these purposes, a line running from Shelley and Byron, to Frida Kahlo, and on, through Ray Johnson, to, say, Anselm Kiefer, Jenny Watson, Jeff Koons, Cindy Sherman, Peter Tyndall, Mark Siebert?)

Or are the terms, as Siebert offers them here, not sufficiently loaded, not high-toned enough? The romance quotient was a little down. No tragic Janis or Jimi, no tragic *Manfred on the Jungfrau*.

And is the art's rhetorical question—about the status of the artist—relevant anyway? It's not that we must care so much about artists' welfare—as opposed to that of postmen, nurses, lawyers—but it might be that the artist's difficulties stand for our own. The impossibility of reconciling the ideal with the market economy that Siebert enacts is an amusing instance (a tragic instance maybe) of our own struggles to achieve balance, time, peace and the rest of the human fulfillment package. Possibly?

The exhibition perhaps needed to weight both ends of the equation. The humour of the quasi-bject, of ineptitude and fecklessness, was played relentlessly, but a counter-balance of idealism (crazed, amusing, extreme, impossible—all of these would have done) was much less present. The book and the DVD might have been thought to count towards some balance but, within the exhibition, came off as ancillary, paths indicated but untrodden.

Siebert's best work has had the viewer placed between approval and disapproval. *Poetry and Pay-days* was finally a little one-dimensional. Not a disaster, but too easy, too predictable. It solicited and received an

indulgent approval. The show lacked, too, any single work that delivered the big hit of the *Apples* exhibition—no centre-piece sculpture, nor anything like that exhibition's 'Modern Lovers LP' painting. No painting that was actually interesting *as* a painting or as image. Concept was all. These are the perils of designing a show far away and arriving without much time to set it up or to reconsider options. And now he's gone—*the artist has left the building!*