

## **Hossein Valamanesh—survey exhibition, Art Gallery of South Australia, June 29 - August 26, 2001**

by Ken Bolton

It is not often that the Art Gallery of South Australia gives a retrospective to a contemporary artist. Not often, either, that the show should be as popular as Hossein Valamanesh's. It's been well attended and received very good word-of-mouth.

The Valamanesh survey was a large exhibition and well set out. I am always a little resistant to Valamanesh's work initially but was won over after a time—which is also usual. The process marks a real engagement with the work—which the work demands and induces—which is why so many people like it I think. I mean that a good deal of art, in comparison, registers first *and only* as category: we approve, or don't, too easily.

Basic to Valamanesh's work—sometimes its express theme, usually its organizing and philosophical principle—is a gap between idea and sign or material presence. The works indicate, gesture towards meanings. Abstract and pure, meaning is in, and of, another realm. It's beauty is expressed by the beauty of the wonderfully textured, yet humble and artisanal signs that the works are—as if the material world's degree of poignancy vouched for the corresponding clarity and searing truth of the *non*-material, the spiritual.

Presence and absence power many works in another and literal way too. There are depictions and installations throughout featuring empty shoes, empty boats—and haunting many pieces is the signature Valamanesh outline figure or partial figure, somewhere between artist-persona, anonymous individual and 'Everyman'. The works often provoke a very distilled and focused nostalgia or yearning, flashes of remembered epiphany or insight. A lot of these

terms, of course, have had bad press from Western empiricism and rationalism and have earned it. Yet Valamanesh's work does not attract this distrust—for a start the vision longed-for, intuited, is not strictly speaking comforting. It is ascetic, even, in its pathos—though it asserts the human as enabling or being 'up to' these perceptions. (Still, it is interesting how opposed this is to Modernism's effort to condense style and content, form and content.)

These points are succinctly illustrated by *Learning To Read*: two squarish panels of identical size, one in black on black spelling out in Farsi script the word for "nothingness". The matching panel to its left is a grid of sixteen illustrations from a children's primer: brightly coloured everyday objects minus the names that would have identified them—matchbox, shoe, hat, jeep, camel and so on—one for each elegantly severe repetition of the Farsi character. The work can be taken to *equate* the panels and their content, their world views; to posit one as Eastern the other as Western, as spiritual and material, materialistic and spiritual, as everyday and latent truth, as two truths or realities.

Most of the show had this depth and some pieces great drama and éclat. A specially darkened room featured a 'dervish', a whirling white cone of material—suspended, weightlessly—endlessly revolving. Many works focused attention upon a division of elements—earth, water, oil and fire? These had enormous power, authority and presence.

As a wall panel somewhere in the show stated, wonder and bewilderment were held to be necessary to understand God, in some Middle Eastern philosophies, or were the closest one might approach to God.

A few pieces perhaps award the viewer too many points for assenting to well-meaning identifications of natural forms and universalist truisms about Nature. *Lifeline* is an instance. A hand's

lifeline is traced over an earthen pattern that might be a desert's ridges, a thumb print, tidal marks, indeed the texture of the same palm's skin. The hand's lifeline seems similarly river and tree branch—and more.

Secondly, and while it is generally undeniably effective in Valamanesh's work—and 'exquisite'—the tasteful aesthetic of 'simple forms', earthen and vegetable colours (sticks, twigs, seeds, sand and soil—white, orange, siennas, wheaten colours) has been very much colonized by the craft world and *Country Road* catalogues, magazines like *Inside Out* or *Home and Garden*—in fact by anything (beauty products, say) emphasizing 'the natural' and 'simple'. Some of the lesser pieces do not manage to rise above this as they perhaps once did now that the gravitational pull of this world of good taste has increased. (It often strikes me that this is an orientalism performed by the world of craft and design whereby the desert/nomadic life's 'simple' materiality is quoted and appropriated by the West in the same way as with the modernist Primitivisms of early last century, but which goes unremarked because shorn of registered trademarks—a generic, bleached 'authenticity' not too tethered to *anywhere* specifically.) (On the other hand civilization has always hankered after the rustic—Marie Antoinette's shepherds' huts, the 'rustic' stonework on Renaissance villas, rich Romans 'retiring' to the simple life of their country estates.)

This is an aesthetic Valamanesh is entitled to—his background is Iranian—but it might now be becoming a contaminated area. Though it must be said that Valamanesh seems to operate there with impunity.

The exhibition documented many of Hossein Valamanesh's public art works and temporary sculptures, from a career, now, of more than twenty years. Two I liked were a replica abandoned Iranian building (*Dwelling*, 1980), and a piece in a forest called *In memory of snow* (2000). They show something of the range the conceptual scheme absence/presence can be stretched to.

The 'earnest researcher' should know: the exhibition produced a very good catalogue—with essays by the curator, Sarah Thomas, and by Paul Carter and Ian North.