

‘Notes on an Exhibition’, *Then, Now: Now*

During the solitary months of planning and completing my 2017 work I read Steven Carroll’s ‘Notes on a Novel’ and ‘Postscript’ published at the conclusion of his novel *A New England Affair*. His no-nonsense, straightforward description of the planning and research processes undertaken and the anxieties and difficulties of ‘bringing to life’ a new body of work made me rethink how I should write about this exhibition: hence, these personal, somewhat unassuming *Notes on an Exhibition*.

In my 36 previous solo exhibitions I have presented only recent work, but in *Then, Now: Now* I have included 3 paintings, one completed in 2004, and 2 in 2009, with the ones completed this year.

The now well-established model of exhibiting only ‘recent’ works in solo exhibitions seems to me somewhat counter-productive: detrimental, even, to understanding an artist’s life-long art practice. Survey exhibitions, especially those of female artists, are rare or come rather too late in life – at least for the artist. So called ‘new works’ seem to automatically acquire more status than those displayed once or twice and either sold or stored away under wraps.

Strange it is to find how one can become so accustomed to viewing one’s own past work as screen images or printed reproductions that the experience of seeing the actual works again can be surprisingly revealing.

Any reproduction of, in the case of my work, a painting, no matter how excellent in quality, renders it flattened, fails to register subtle surface and tonal variation and depicted pictorial space, reduces the work to a miniature version of the original and provides only a front-on view – that of the camera’s original positioning.

My past works in my personal archive occupy a separate space to my studio workspace and those of my works in private or public collections I rarely, if ever, see again. I suspect that, like me, most artists are so completely focussed on works currently being made - the ‘Now’ works - that the ‘Then’ works live on as vaporous images in one’s memory or as impersonal replicas on various websites.

My recent participation in two significant group exhibitions (*Coney Island*, Counihan Gallery, September 30- October 29 and *The Void. Visible. Abstraction & Non-Objective Art*, Deakin University Gallery, 1 November-15 December 2017) required unwrapping stored paintings from 2001-2015 to show the curators. This meant relocating them to my studio working space where they stood side-by-side with works in progress intended for this exhibition *Then, Now: Now*. Little did I know that this simple act of placing the *Then* works alongside the *Now* works would steer the course of this exhibition in an unexpected direction. Despite obvious colour, material and compositional dissimilarities the connections between old and new cannot be ignored – rather they enhance and complement each other’s narrative substance.

As recorded by Carroll in his “Notes” I too find settling on something new – connected conceptually to, but different from, past works a fundamental aspect of my artistic practice. The impulse to ‘make pictures’ is, in itself difficult to explain, even to oneself, let alone explaining the precise impetus for making specific ones. All my

works have evolved from a combination of reading, experiencing ancient, modern and contemporary art and in particular artefacts produced by civilisations now long gone and marvelling at the propensity of art to retain its 'voice' – a distant past echo – which can, nevertheless, still resonate: in this case, a distant echo reverberating with my own cultural past.

The history of ancient Rome, the destruction and later unearthing of archaeological finds in Pompeii and Herculaneum, in Aztec and Inca burial sites, Egyptian, Greek and Macedonian artefacts, monuments, mosaics, ceramics, glass ware and textiles captured my interest long ago. This material is, of course, sublimated but the artistic unconscious does not let it quietly rest there.

The structure, colouration, forms of the 2017 works have evolved through a process of trial and error (invisible and unknowable to any viewer) but have been built on the foundations of the earlier works, including those shown *Now*, in this exhibition.

The blacks, greys and earth colours predominant in the 2017 works are ones I have not used for decades. Earth colours made from actual earth, or ones that reference it, the greys of ash, mud, granite, minerals; the reds and oranges of lava, the blacks of carbonised wood, obsidian, jet, coal seem to better express my ideas. My earlier, brighter works sparkle with allusions to glass, reflective surfaces, unnavigable spaces, contemporary urban architecture and glitzy advertising hoardings. Despite the work's cheerful appearance their solid forms and linear demarcations are unstable, broken, perhaps by seismic events, but these are still held tenuously intact by force of will. The current works might be described as coarser, harsher - gloomier even - and less spatially active. The plotting of forms, delineation of ground, shattering of space may act to disguise my attempt to salvage that which has existed in a prior form, in another time. Perhaps I now better understand that what is built and created in one era, destroyed in another, can be reconstructed and given an alternative meaning now.

Wilma Tabacco

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