

REALISTIC REPRESENTATION IN AUSTRALIAN ART

by Sam Leach

Below left: JACKSON SLATTERY *Untitled (Wrong Formalism 5)*, 2012 watercolour on paper 55 x 34.5 cm

Courtesy the artist and Sutton Gallery, Melbourne

Below right: STEPHEN BUSH *Duncan Renovator*, 2012 oil and enamel on linen 203 x 244 cm

Courtesy the artist and Sutton Gallery, Melbourne

Opposite: JUAN FORD *Misunderstanding Everything*, 2009 oil on linen 107 x 122 cm

Courtesy the artist and Dianne Tanzer Gallery, Melbourne



Jackson Slattery's *Wrong Formalism 5*, 2012, is, at first glance, reminiscent of a colourfield abstract from the second half of the twentieth century. On closer examination it is revealed as a very detailed painting of a cracked pane of reinforced glass. This textured glass obscures visual details and forms a protective barrier. This is something that even the most accurate representational painting does - removes and distorts details and creates an aesthetic distance between the viewer and the object or scene depicted. In this work the complexities of representation begin to unfold - or perhaps they are layered.

Among these complexities is the relationship between realistic representational painting and mechanical reproduction: Slattery's works replicate the look of a photograph, even when they refer to the history of painting - both ancient and modern. Another is the tension between the apparent easy accessibility of representational art and the rigorous, confronting challenges we expect from contemporary art (i.e. the avant-garde). Slattery uses watercolour, a technique associated with decades of sentimental hobby art, even though it is one of the most technically demanding. Then there is the very depiction of reality - Slattery's mark making is subtle and suggestive. Often what we perceive as details are, in fact, crafted illusions. There is a real pleasure in moving our perception from the fact of the paint to the illusion and back.

This pleasure can almost work against the painting itself. Schopenhauer, considering still life paintings of food, found that paintings of "dispositive naturalness" would excite his appetite and "this is just a stimulation of the will and puts an end to any aesthetic

contemplation of the object". Once the pleasure from an artwork is experienced, perhaps extra willpower needs to be summoned to dig any deeper into the work. The human brain responds more readily to the promise of reward than the actual delivery of it (this is why poker machines are so profitable). Furthermore, the very literalness of representational painting, especially where it is accurate, also creates a resistance to interpretation. The thing depicted is before the viewer without guessing or extrapolating from hints. Diderot, commenting on the still life paintings of Chardin, could only note that they were "there".

Well, the things that were 'there' are here again. There has been some resurgence or return to realistic, skilful representational art. This change is not a uniquely Australian phenomenon. Nor is the interest in the nature of representation limited to the arts. In recent years a growing body of scholarship in the philosophy of science has drawn on art theory to consider problems of representation in scientific theory, which also faces problems of aesthetic distancing, mimesis and convention.

However, might there be something distinct about the particular type of realistic representational work being produced in the Australian art scene? Simon Gregg, curator at Gippsland Art Gallery and author of *New Romanticism: Darkness and Light in Australian Art* (Australian Scholarly Publishing, 2011) says, "Yes, I definitely think what we're seeing in Australia is unique to Australia. Art fashion moves in cycles, and the pendulum is just swinging the way of realism right now. But added to that, you have to remember that Australia didn't

This hints at the complicated relationship that has developed between technology (especially the old 'mechanical reproduction') and representational art. Simon Gregg says, "I don't think it's any coincidence that realism came back in a big way at exactly the same time the internet arrived (late 1990s)... the more we walk around with smart phones and tablets, the more artists seem to want to recreate something that looks photographic by hand. Computers have just made everything so easy now, and artists need a challenge. Realism is that challenge".

Juan Ford has made paintings which test the processes of perception and representation, experimenting with perspective and anamorphosis: "I definitely and self-consciously have been incorporating technology into my work," he says. "Initially I felt I had to justify this in the strict terms of the art-industrial complex - itemising which rules I was breaking and why I was doing so. But this now seems consequential of an afterglow from the time spent in an educational institution. I don't care about it so much anymore. Whatever I have at hand to help me generate better paintings, I will use. That's it".

For artists who studied during the 1990s and early 2000s, representational painting in particular was, if not discouraged, certainly not actively encouraged. Michael Zavros notes, "I recall that awful awakening in first year art school where not only were my skills deemed unimportant but that I was unlikely to encounter a great deal of tuition along those lines. In hindsight, it was a hard but good lesson - ideas are paramount".

Nor is this ambiguity towards skill confined to the art school. "I would say that within contemporary art circles, traditional realists are the ones having to justify their work - is it art?" says Zavros. Chris Bond notes, "I think there's a reluctance amongst sophisticated art viewers to talk about a work's aesthetic or technical merits because they're worried they're going to sound like an unsophisticated art viewer who only takes the work at face value. I think deep down they respond (particularly to painting) on an aesthetic level - at least on an initial viewing - but they'd never admit to it, because it's kind of shameful isn't it? I love talking about technique and aesthetics, I could go on and on and on, quite happily bore people stupid... because it's so critical to what I do, I think about it day and night".

However, the perspective of a public institution may be different: "I see audiences getting less tolerant," says Simon Gregg. "Bill Henson could do what he liked 20 years ago, yet today he works under a cloud of suspicion for doing exactly the same thing. We've become more conservative and we want comfort and security. There are enough scary things out there - people don't want them in their art galleries. And that's why pictures that look like things appeal. Perhaps the trick is to make it subversive, without scaring off the masses".

In some ways this seems concerning for the putative resurgence of realistic representation. On one hand it is a cultural expression amenable to absorbing and reflecting any cultural and technological development, yet the legitimacy and apparent accessibility of it lend it to becoming a symbol of a slightly repressive mood in society. "Modernism (dead but still breathing), and its happily tortured traveller are alive and with us," says Andrew Browne, "and to many of them the realist approach you allude to is for them simply further evidence of both the 'market', a reactionary position and a corruption of art's true moral and ideological trajectory. And the punters seem to like it too, which is of further consternation!"

Perhaps the problem here is partly biological. "Visual art is an evolutionary by-product of the brain's automated process of recognition and interpolation, and therefore it is easy to dismiss Realism for being innately accessible," says Lloyd, "but that is only if you can define a genre of realism and a standard of reality.



ANDREW BROWNE *Lair*, 2012 oil on linen 145 x 244 cm

Courtesy the artist and Tolarno Galleries, Melbourne



really develop an art scene until the late-nineteenth century with the Australian Impressionists. And then we went straight into Modernism, and then Abstraction, Minimalism and Post-Modernism. So Australian art has never really gone through a realist phase. I think we're just making up for lost time".

Andrew Browne observes that, "here [in Australia] there has always been a solid, if at times marginalised strand of artists working in this area - but often the best exemplifiers are lone figures - thinking of the sixties and seventies, when abstraction was the prevailing trend amongst 'progressive' artists, there was Smart and Delafield Cook to name a couple. But right now, and in the last several years, there does seem to be a generation or two who have emerged here who particularly exemplify a strong realist tradition, but one that steers clear of simple fidelity to the subject".

Michael Zavros concurs, "I am suddenly aware of realism all over the place. Social media has also put me in touch with a lot of painters I wouldn't have known about and many of them are Australians. It's hard to say if this is a global trend. I don't think modes of practice or media fall in and out of fashion in quite the same way as they do here. Or rather with a smaller pool of practitioners it is more noticeable - in the same way that there is a proliferation of street art and abstraction. I think perhaps representational painting as a mode is just concurrent with various trends".

Realistic representation in painting overlaps with a strain of realistic simulation. That is, creating replicas and models is related to the sort of representation sometimes found in realistic painting. The trompe l'oeil of Jackson Slattery and especially Chris Bond spring to mind here: painstaking work designed to be almost indistinguishable from the object being depicted or recreated. Writing in *Art Monthly* in 2011, John Kelly noted that, "It is a fact that in the last decade of the Venice Biennale every Australian presentation has presented some form of hyper-realism."

He highlighted particularly the skilled carvings of Ricky Swallow, the hyper-real sculpture of Patricia Piccinini, Callum Morton's *Valhalla* and Ken Yonetani's sugar *Sweet Barrier Reef*. Kelly points out that this is an important and consistent theme in Australian art (though not the only theme) and, indeed, Kelly's recent work includes detailed models of museums, complete with internal exhibitions (such as *The Garden Shed*, 2011).

The idea of realistic representation is slippery though. As Tony Lloyd notes, "When Stephen Bush pours different enamels and house paints together and they miraculously transform into a mountain range, the effect is uncanny. It is a transubstantiation of one reality into another. Louise Hearman can create radiant light reflecting off a child's head with just a few well-chosen brush strokes. She doesn't even cover the masonite board and yet she conjures a convincing reality. Andrew Browne recently showed a painting called *Lair* that depicted a couple of sheets of plywood and not much else. The painting had almost no depth, but the loving recreation of wood grain, rusty staples and damp stains were the most exquisite lies. It combined high formal elegance with a commitment to the visual reality of the world beyond the painted paint and shaped shapes of abstract painting".

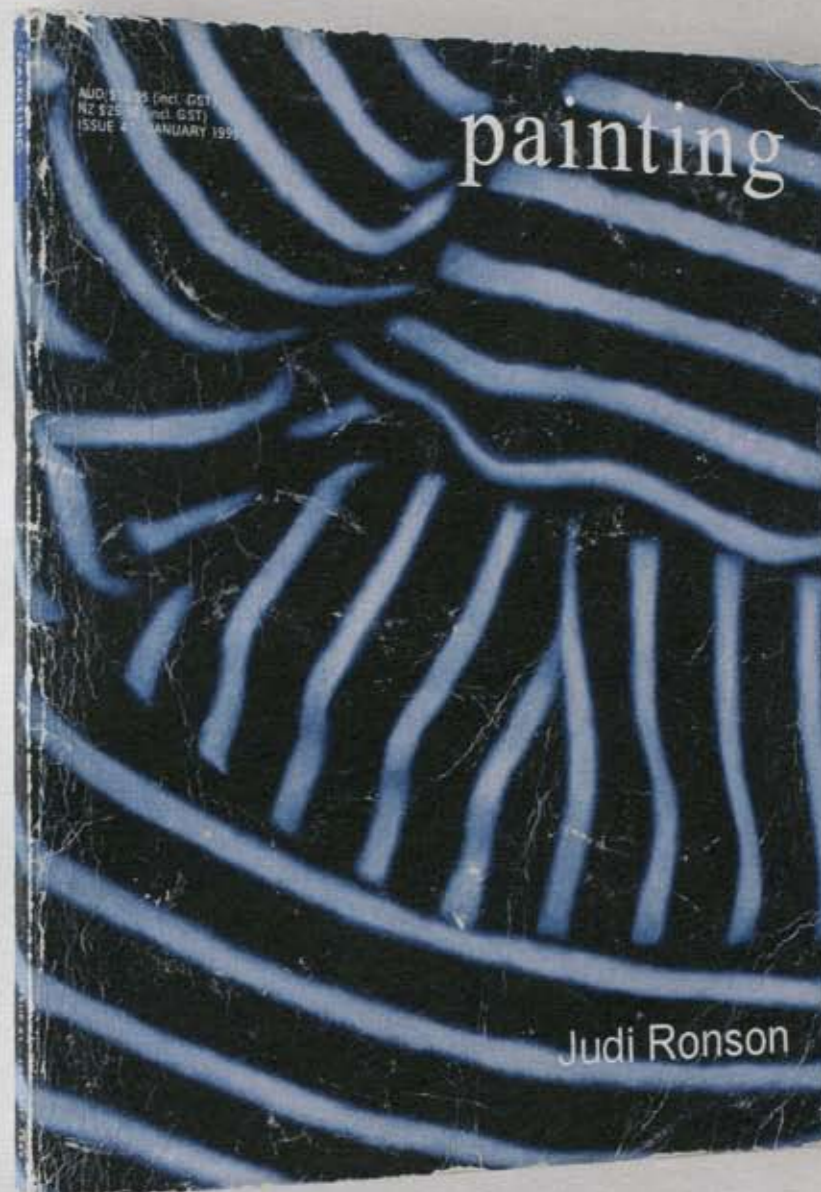
Andrew Browne offers some interesting insights into this particular work, noting just how he considered both the formal aspects of the image and the relationship of the work to key works from the modern history of formalism: "Whilst making the painting [*Lair*] I also got delightfully caught up in the trompe l'oeil rendering of the plywood (should it look like it had come straight from the hardware, or be grubby and weather-worn, and how do you paint wood grain anyway?) - and was reminded of my past interest in Jasper Johns' use of flatness, and slippages between reality and abstraction. I was also reminded of Rauschenberg's total embrace of 'reality' in his work - that all out there (and around the block) was prime material for art".

In Chris Bond's work we find a fascinating examination of some of the ways that formalism can retain a commitment to the world beyond paint: "You'd think," says Bond, "looking at the kinds of artists historically associated with formalism, that representational art couldn't possibly be formal. Recognisable subject matter seems to deny the idea of 'not referencing outside the frame'. But I'm not so sure. Look at Bernd and Hilla Becher's photographic, obviously representational, but in reality they are exponents of some very serious formalism. The same could be said of 1970s photorealism (well, naively formal, maybe). Thinking of my own work, particularly about the works I made for Ryan Renshaw last year - the show contained a series of eight painted art magazines, each profiling a single fictional artist, with a featured artwork on the cover that had been generated by an online image search linked to their name. So they were programmatic, as a lot of my work is. I set up a perverse rule to follow and see through".

The notion of visual reality is open to interpretation. As Tony Lloyd further observes, "The reality of our optical vision is probably far less detailed than a photo-realist painting. We are not cameras, our brains invent most of our visual field, we are sublimely unaware that there are two gaping holes in our vision where the optical nerve connects to the retina. Our visual reality may be realistic, but it is largely a construction. The fact that we are so easily tricked by the visual arts is what I find intriguing. The fact that 24 sequential images per second turn into fluid movement in film, or that an artful smear of coloured dirt and oil can turn into an eye, a hand, a landscape etc."

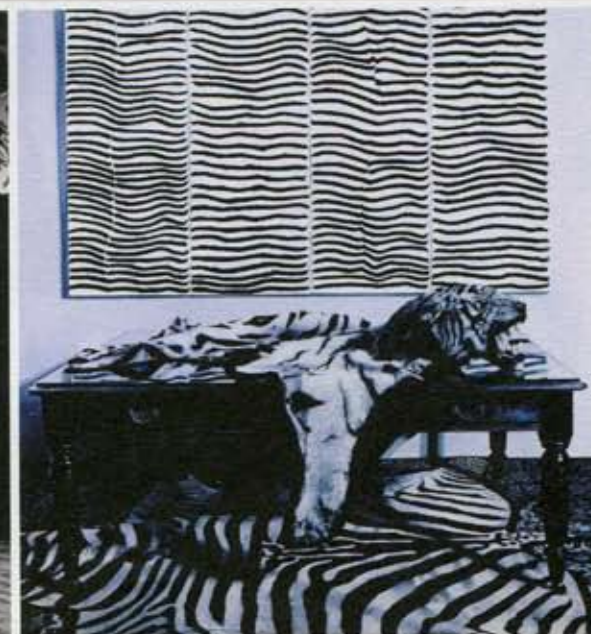
'I DEFINITELY THINK WHAT WE'RE SEEING IN AUSTRALIA IS UNIQUE TO AUSTRALIA. ART FASHION MOVES IN CYCLES, AND THE PENDULUM IS JUST SWINGING THE WAY OF REALISM RIGHT NOW.'

Simon Gregg



TONY LLOYD *Stylus and Turntable*, 2012 oil on canvas 92 x 71 cm

Courtesy the artist



MICHAEL ZAVROS *Bodylines*, 2012 oil on canvas 210 x 195 cm

Courtesy the artist and Sophie Gannon Gallery, Melbourne

Top: CHRIS BOND *Olive*, 2012 oil on linen, canvas, card, mdf 26.7 x 30.7 x 2.5 cm

Courtesy the artist and Nellie Castan Gallery, Melbourne