

CHANCE UPON NOTHING EXHIBITION

Opening address by Emeritus Professor Richard Perry, 2013

I first met Bill Sampson, who is responsible for the impressive paintings which loom around you, at a course I gave at the Victorian College of the Arts on Mysticism and the Arts of Asia. While most of the students either doodled or gaped as I talked and showed slides, Bill would stir from his slouching, seemingly Buddhist calm to ask keenly pertinent questions that sought some sharper clarity to the received wisdom which I was so blithely dispensing. He invited me to his cramped studio space at the VCA and, to my stuttering amazement, I saw for the first time his bold and accomplished experimentation with large sheets of paper which he had somehow bathed and extracted from tubs of water, oil, paint and whatnot. Indeed the mysterious production of these paintings increased their allure. Eventually, his vast paintings (reduced, I think, by the simple term “marbling”) comprised an audacious Ph.D. exhibition at the VCA. His works have been shown elsewhere in Melbourne and in England and Italy, and have won a number of awards.

If you know Bill, you will be aware that there is a restless, questing fervency in his brain that does not always find easy resolution; rather, his passions, like his aesthetic, take and cede a certain pleasure in contradiction, uncertainty, self-deflation, satiric grandiosity, the ineffable, and a zesty sensuality admixed with introspection. And visa-versa. In his shambolic yet rigorous manner, he works hard to control what seems spontaneous and rather gleefully accepts the accidental that eludes technical control.

Art historians, curators and critics are of course always trying to place any artist’s machinations within the historical development of styles and movements, knowing that contemporary art evolves from art of the past. David O’Halloran, curator of the Glen Eira Gallery, has said of Bill’s marbling work that he sees them “as mind maps or as explorations of a hitherto unseen world. This could be a world of destruction, of an angry earth fighting for its very survival.” The young critic Justin Clements, faced with providing annotations for Bill’s Ph.D. exhibition catalogue, conjured up an hallucinogenic prose to mirror the painted phantasmagoria: “Behold the sniffing beaks of decapitated parrots, the stripped pennants and ensigns of failed stellar armies, the slop and wobble of biomorphic teratologies, the pallid and silent throne of heaven...fat seamy veins of chocolaty horror, the crinkled spectres of not-so-fresh brains, the kitschy rip and crack of paper and bone!” Clements said that “Bill Sampson gives us soft-horror, cheesy sci-fi, disappointingly grainy porn, a kind of squishy generic implosion of degraded techniques...” I think not, somehow, but Clements at least implies the exhilaration one feels in front of these paintings, the kaleidoscopic multiplicity of possible visualizations, and the koan-like challenge to rational understanding.

If we stand back, the vista is cosmic; if we bend in and look closely, the view may be cellular. As Bill himself states, “nano or macro – anyone’s guess. They sometimes scare me.” Although he acknowledges the struggle of his own technical intercession in the birth of these most natural looking paintings, Bill owns enough of the philosopher’s penchant for detached reflection on their meaning. Again, I quote the artist: “These works literally represent the uncaring movement of nature as it alone swarms and spills

the paint into its chaotic patterns on the surface of the marbling bath. For this reason the marbling is nihilistic, meaningless and as absurd as nature is. It represents a universe that appears to me confusing, complex, confounding and ultimately uncaring – despite, or because of the horrid logic of its physics – and beautiful as such. I think of it as a peep at the Real, the illusion of our constructed and fantastic reality momentarily wiped away – and a peep at our future.” Furthermore, he says that, “In all my work I seek the means to reflect the world that we cannot restrain or affect – so as to better understand the relative unimportance of the world perceived only via our constructs or bias – one in which I nevertheless appear to quite contentedly reside!”

Most importantly, Bill keeps experimenting, keeps finding new ways to use the bath, new methods to spruik chance, new intrusions into the chemistry of his medium, new surprises in the outcome. No longer content to bring us molecular microcosms and galactic macrocosms, in this fascinating new exhibition he introduces foreign materials into the marbling bath, plays with them, and welcomes the thrills, and perhaps groans, at the results. It’s a crap shoot in a way, with the dice only half loaded. As Bill puts it, in this exhibition he is “orchestrating the paint so that the paint itself is moving and pushing around what appears to be ‘negative’ spaces – those parts in the images that appear as white spaces, until it finds a stillness at which there is balance – but not necessarily the place at which we...intended.” He goes on, “each paint acts differently owing to its chemical difference and fluidity etc. Some spreads out but when another is added they are compressed and stretched and sometimes almost obliterated. In this exhibition I am using these forces to push around and tear apart concrete objects (they’re paper actually) floating in the bath.” Happily enough, and for all truly intensive purposes, we the viewers are invited both to stand back to admire the formal (de)construction but also to draw near to observe a million little flow charts.

Ambroise Vollard once told Degas of a painter who had come to him, exclaiming, “At last I have found my true style!” “Well,” said Degas, “I’m glad I haven’t found my true style yet. I’d be bored to death.” Bill Sampson, I suspect, will never be bored. He continues to explore ‘the bath’ as he terms it with undiminished curiosity, technical prowess, and startling result.

Bill Sampson’s paintings are unique, intelligent, sensual, endlessly engaging, profound and fun. It is a pleasure for me to declare the exhibition, “chance upon nothing,” open.

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