

# sebastian di mauro

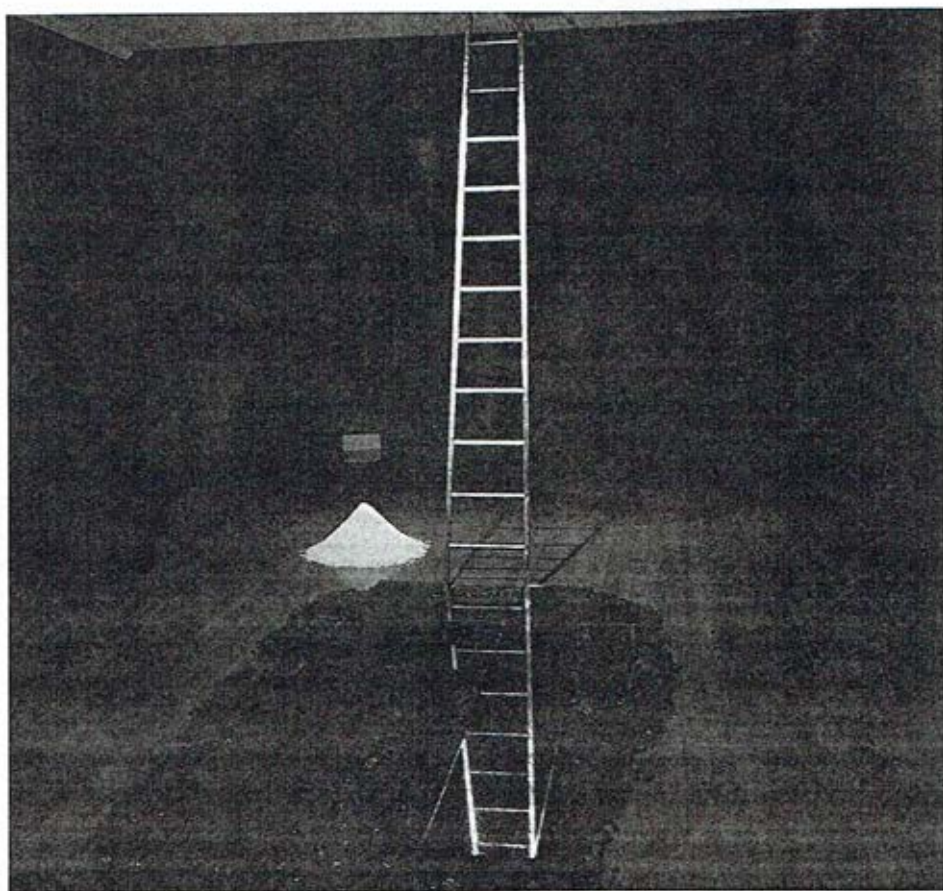
entrances, exits and immortality

by jane magon

One enters a room in darkness. Transparent, black, silk-like fabric billows and dissolves one's sense of boundary, other edges of space disappear in soft-edged blackness. Immediately one senses an evocation of the sublime and of a space beyond measure—a presentation of the unrepresentable. Di Mauro's installation *Evanescence*, 1993,<sup>1</sup> suggests that although it is located in a 'void' there is an escape to another world. An eerie quiet pervades the room and a spot-lit copper ladder reaches resolutely upwards towards a higher plane, 'another world'.

Di Mauro's installation was comprised of space, objects (pool, ladder, a pile of crystals) and paintings on carpet underlay; two on the wall and two resting between floor and wall. Symbols painted on smaller 'mats' of carpet underlay abounded, sliding between wall and floor, linking the two planes, curving the space and providing a symbolic connection between earth and air. Di Mauro uses carpet-underlay as "a metaphor for the process of pulling away surface layers (of life, ourselves) in a process of self-examination."<sup>2</sup> Several concepts dominate this artist's current work: the confrontation and struggle with the self and with self-acceptance and the transcendental and philosophical questions on the possibility of after-life.

*Labyrinth*, the first of the four paintings which were part of the installation, depicts the ancient symbol of a labyrinth worked in yellow. This symbol has long represented the earth as mother, the uterus of the earth and its seed; or life as a puzzling journey, a place of ritual procession from childhood into adulthood; and a sacred site to bury the dead.<sup>3</sup> In this way the labyrinth can be seen as a symbol of both death and rebirth and is descriptive "of the entire spiritual journey."<sup>4</sup> The second painting, *End/Beginning*, mirrored the message of the installation as a whole—the end as a new beginning. On its surface the Tree of Life is painted in a split, negative



Sebastian Di Mauro, *Evanescence*, 1993. Installation. Steel, copper, timber, salt, water, video, pigment, carpet underlay, coal, cloth, air. 12 x 700 x 360 mm.

and positive image in blue. The tree is also the *axis mundi* that leads to the heavens and to life after death. The tree represents, for Di Mauro, an image of

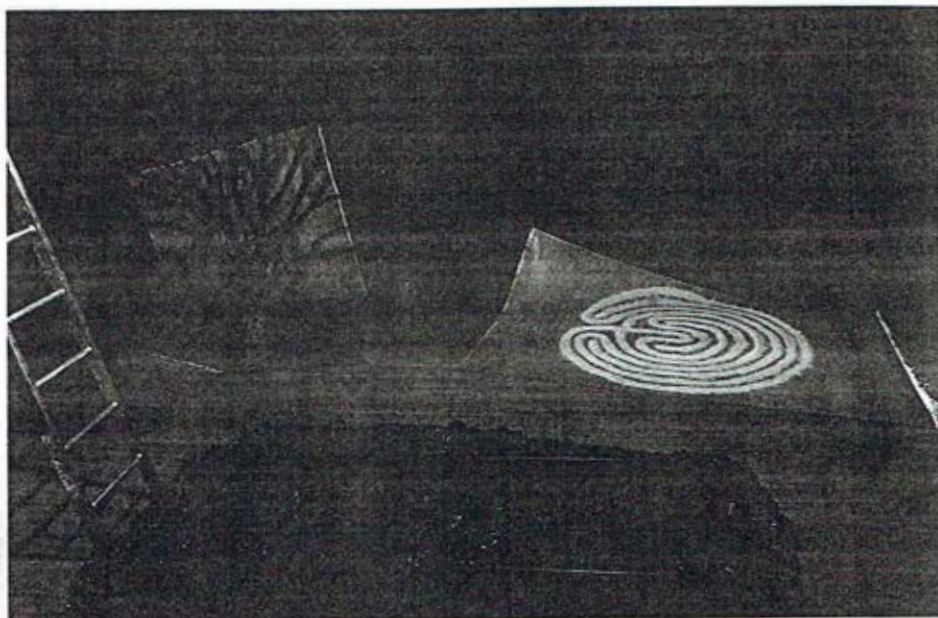
personal growth, for "its branches reach beyond the painting's edge hinting at concepts of personal expansion."<sup>5</sup>

From the Centre, the third large image in the installation, represents a sunburst of yellow-orange light reaching from a centre of evanescence: a light that is both there and not there. This piece refers to enlightenment, light and "about looking inside oneself to find the light".<sup>6</sup> It is also the light you might see when you are dying, or the light obtained through one's inner spiritual journey. It is a light with which Di Mauro was personally acquainted during a near death experience in a car accident in 1981, and was perhaps the catalyst for his own spiritual enquiry. The fourth painting, *Fountain*, is a dynamic depiction of a human figure surrounded by a blue aura. At the centre of this image is, to quote Peter Anderson, "a force passing through.... a sort of fountain of life"<sup>7</sup>, or life-force. The image is also a reference to spiritual cleansing, as was the conical pile of sea salt crystals, which was placed on the floor, and which signified rituals of cleansing, healing and preserving. This pile of crystals brought to mind Di Mauro's earlier use of substances such as ochres and ash. Often in his works of the last few years we find containers of substances that speak of mysterious rituals of a pre-historic past. In another recent exhibition, *Praeparatio Physica*, held at Omniscent Gallery, a work entitled *Sublimate*, 1993, for example, comprised a rough-hewn granite container of water which had a light suspended over it and was placed in front of a painting of mystic blue. A sense of ritual and of tranquillity emanated from it.

These substances—ochre, ash, kaolin, coal, gold dust, water and live flame—might be interpreted as referring to rituals of the celebration of death, to a transition to the afterlife, because of their use in the preparation of the corpse. They hint at purification rituals, post mortem rites and funeral makeup, and traditionally they connote initiation and rebirth.<sup>8</sup> Such materials suggest the rites of separation that set the deceased on the road to the beyond and ensure passage from one stage to the next, just as their evocation of ritual suggests the removal of barriers between mythological and everyday worlds.<sup>9</sup>

In *Evanescence*, the centre of the room was occupied by a grid-like Japanese temple gate structure, similar to a Torii gate, but laid out on the floor. Despite its complex form it held pure, blue water, which for Di Mauro refers to traditional water-purification rites of cleansing prior to re-birth, seen as a preparation for immortality. In this type of ritual, water assumes great significance as a life-giving, purifying symbol of rejuvenation (similar to its use in Christian baptism).

In many cultures water is seen as "the source of all things and of all existences".<sup>10</sup> Eliade suggests that:



Sebastian Di Mauro, *Evanescence*, 1993. Installation. Steel, copper, timber, salt, water, video, pigment, carpet underlay, coal, cloth, air. 12 x 700 x 360 mm.

In initiation rituals, water confers a "new birth", in magic rituals it heals, and in funeral rites it assures rebirth after death...water becomes a symbol of life.<sup>11</sup>

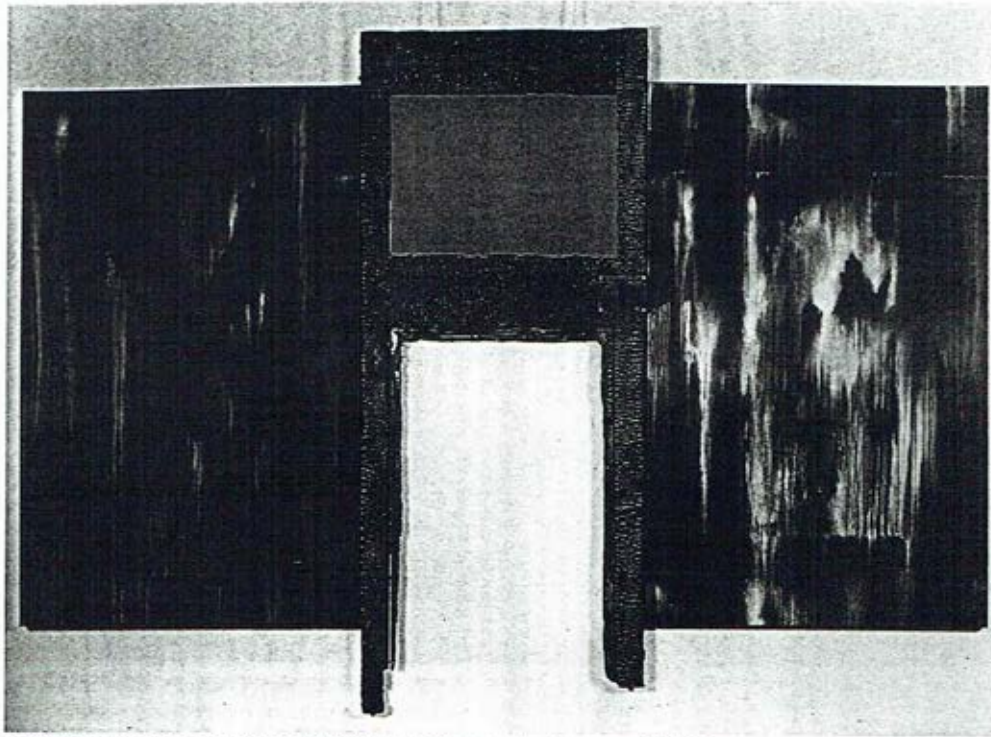
As ablution is seen to purify, it was "done before all major religious acts, to prepare man for his entry into the economy of the sacred" [sic].<sup>12</sup> The use of water in Di Mauro's work carries all these inherent meanings.

The shape of the grid-like structure harkens back to Di Mauro's use of the grid in previous work, where it functions as his symbol for 'humankind'. In *Evanescence*, black coal was mounded around this Torii gate-shaped pool, a substance "which helps to nurture humankind, while it is also a symbol of stored energy."<sup>13</sup> Di Mauro notes that "the coal, the water and the copper covered ladder are references to energy being transferred from one plane to another, while carbon and water refer to the main components of the body."<sup>14</sup> Di Mauro's conscious use of basic elements (light, water, acid, coal, copper, gold, silver, pure and corroded steel) appears to have an alchemical significance, referring to transformation as part of the process towards immortality. There are suggestions of the alchemical in his combination of magical or spiritual symbols and fundamental sub-

stances and processes. Perhaps Di Mauro falls into the class which Evelyn Underhill describes as "Spiritual Alchemists", for whom the "quest of the [philosopher's] Stone" becomes a search for spiritual self knowledge, and is "hence an appropriate symbol for mystic life", or for a search into the soul.<sup>15</sup> Underhill notes that "spiritual chemistry is a proper part of the true hermetic science".<sup>16</sup> She states that:

Man then, was for the alchemists "the true laboratory of the Hermetic art", which concealed in an entanglement of vague and contradictory symbols the life process of his ascension to that perfect state in which he was able to meet God.<sup>17</sup> [sic]

Many of Di Mauro's works since 1990 juxtapose 'ancient' and modern materials—technologically advanced, pure and corroded metals are contrasted with ancient, ritualistic materials (ash, soil, salt, crystals). His use of flawless and corroded metals is "a metaphor for the human ageing process": a metaphoric pathway to death and rebirth.<sup>18</sup> His work describes our life-cycle as being a process of transformation from purity to decay to cleansing and rebirth and indicates that before we move from one plane to another we must go through a cleansing



Sebastian Di Mauro, *Entrance (In/accessible)*, 1990. Acrylic paint, canvas, burnt door, mirror. 206 x 290 cm.

process. In *Evanescence*, for example, the grid-bath was placed at the foot of the ladder that reached up to the mysterious black 'void'. The light shining on the up-stretched ladder signified a promise of immortality. Previous works by Di Mauro, such as *Transition*, also contain ladders (*axis mundi*) symbolically leading the viewer to heaven or to another metaphysical level or state.

Di Mauro's conviction and the persistence of his use of symbolism is revealed in earlier work. A particularly appropriate example is the triptych *Entrance In/Accessible*, 1990 which has as its centre a grid-like door-frame which is reminiscent of the Torii gate-pool in *Evanescence*. The door contains a mirrored panel replete with transient reflections—it is both a doorway to a void and a means of forcing the viewer to confront his or her self. It allows the viewer, symbolically, to confront the inaccessible, offering a vision of a reality which is beyond reach.<sup>19</sup>

This evocation of the transcendental void is reinforced by the fact that the doorframe is burnt out, and the lower half left open and empty—allowing the mind (or body) to pass through freely. This structuring and destructuring sets up a tension and a

sense of paradox, for it appears that one can pass through, yet one cannot do so—as the title *Entrance In/Accessible* suggests. One can physically penetrate the lower but not the upper section. This structural ambiguity embodies the philosophical questions that Di Mauro poses regarding the nature of the transcendental. The work's structure exposes the dilemma, spatially, philosophically and metaphysically, raising questions to which there are no definite answers.

It becomes evident that there is strong emphasis on entrances, doorways, and gates in Di Mauro's work. In *Praeparatio Physica* for example, the work *Buoyancy* is a window frame pressed over with lead and sitting just above a timber shelf on which rests a carved wooden receptacle containing oil. Why this persistent emphasis on entrances, on pools of water, voids, ladders and doorways? MacDonald and co-authors, in an article titled "Mirrors, Portals and Multiple Realities", refer to a process called "portalling", which is described as a "Biogenetic structural explanation" for "The cross-culturally common mystical experience of moving from one reality to another *via* a tunnel, door, aperture, hole".<sup>20</sup> Portalling devices might include "mirror, mandala,

labyrinth, skrying bowl, pool of water", crystals—all items or images used by Di Mauro.<sup>21</sup> The concept "portal", implies a barrier, hence the title *Entrance In/Accessible*, and the distinction between inside/outside, known/unknown, safety/danger, sacred/profane. Portals appear to "define thresholds and liminality and to present new possibilities for being" because they can also "demarcate the qualities of transition".<sup>22</sup> Perhaps Di Mauro's early paintings and drawings might be portals rather than grids, as they have been described. His doors, gates, mirrors, labyrinth and water could be interpreted as classic 'portalling' devices which symbolise and encourage mystical experience and a passageway beyond mortality.

Fundamentally, Di Mauro's work appears to be a polemic of life *versus* after-life; a polemic evident in the paired light and dark canvases on either side of his more recent works. This dialogue questions the secular Western concept of the finality of death by comparing it to the Eastern philosophies of rebirth or reincarnation. At some point both ideologies merge in Di Mauro's work. His use of traditional ritual symbolism allows the spiritually concerned person to read the possibility of "immortality", which in its Indo-European derivation means literally "non-death". Di Mauro's concern with 'immortality' is supported by his recognition of a spiritual dimension in his own and others' existence—a dimension that compels people to seek out the origin of life, and to return to it.

Sebastian Di Mauro is a Brisbane-based artist and is Director, Liveworm Design Studio, Queensland College of Art, Griffith University. Jane Magon is a Brisbane-based writer.

#### notes

1. *Evanescence*, 1993. Space Plenty, Brisbane.
2. Conversation between Jane Magon and Sebastian Di Mauro.
3. Fisher, A. and Gerster, G. *The Art Of The Maze*, London: Weidenfeld & Nicholson Ltd., 1990, p.16.
4. MacDonald, G., Cove, John, Laughlin, C. jr. and McManus, J., "Mirrors, Portals and Multiple Realities", *Zygon*, no 24, March 1989, p. 45.
5. Conversation between Jane Magon and Sebastian Di Mauro.
6. *ibid*
7. Anderson, Peter. "Dreams Quickly Fade", *The Brisbane Review*, no.74, Thurs, March 25, 1993, p.8.
8. Ries, Julien. "Immortality", *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, Edit. Mircea Eliade, Vol. 7, New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, pp.123, 125,126.
9. Eliade and McManus quoted by G. MacDonald, et al. *op cit* p. 41.
10. Eliade, Mircea, *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, London: Sheed and Ward, 1976, p. 188
11. *ibid* p. 189
12. *ibid* p. 195
13. Conversation between Jane Magon and Sebastian Di Mauro.
14. *ibid*
15. Underhill, Evelyn. *Mysticism*. London: Methuen, pp.141-143
16. *ibid* p. 143.
17. *ibid* p. 143.
18. Conversation between Jane Magon and Sebastian Di Mauro.
19. G. MacDonald, et al. *op cit*, p. 40.
20. *ibid*, pp. 36-64.
21. *ibid*, p. 39, 42, 45.
22. *ibid*, p. 40. In some cultures a mirror was held over the head of the deceased so that the soul might enter the other world by "entering the mirror". p. 44.

