

floccus
sebastian di mauro



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floccus: wild and woolly

There is grandeur in this view of life.

Charles Darwin, *The Origin of Species*

In many of Sebastian Di Mauro's installations, he alludes to and references transformative processes grounded in the magic of alchemy. These transmutations were integral to those works, which, in the course of the exhibition, their material or matter were substantively altered. In this installation, **floccus**, at the Brisbane City Gallery, Di Mauro seems to be setting the stage for a rather different kind of transformation, a morphological process concerned more with the biological than the chemical.

floccus is duly concerned with form, a kind of fugitive and elusive metamorphosis. The use of carpet underlay in the manufacture of the sculptures accentuates the artist's interest in form and his fondness for this mute and tactile material. Conceptually, this work is seeded in a previous exhibition, *Manifestations*. Describing that body of work, Alison Kubler said

the underlay forms which sit on the floor and the wall would seem to be in the process of transforming, literally taking on their prescribed forms in the temporal relationship to the viewer. Di Mauro has caught these little creatures in the act of manifesting their shape. Some of the forms might be animal or human, hovering between a distinct anthropomorphism and a minimal abstraction.¹

In relation to us, the toy-like 'creatures' comprising *Manifestations* were of a different scale. In terms of their size, those flocculent anomalies posed no threat. They were idiosyncratic and witty, inviting and playful. Kubler described them as 'abject' - both repulsive and attractive. They could be held, cuddled and petted. With the absence of danger, one could be more curious than cautious.

No longer cute and cuddly in this incarnation, the towering giants of **floccus** might provoke a different response. One might approach these more monstrous manifestations with a degree of apprehension. Curiosity is tempered by a heightened sense of caution. The weighty shapes, herded and huddled, are only just perceptible in the semi-lit gallery. The distinctive fusty smell of the underlay permeates the air, adding to the den-like quality of the space. As our eyes adjust to the dimness, a drama unfolds. The 'creatures' loom through the dark, and we might consider whether the fear is double. These gentle giants have been cornered. They look afraid, as if they're about to take flight although their flight is more likely to be lumbering and awkward, rather than swift and fleeting.

Art can also provide other spaces for encounter with these majestic and totemic monoliths. The encounter tends to be uncertain, a phenomenological experience of embodied thought: body, mind, emotions and the senses are engaged. As an example, although not art, recall the American primatologist, Dian Fossey's co-existence with the mountain gorillas in Rwanda in the 1960s and 70s. Fossey was said to be mediating between culture and nature as she received the touch of an inquisitive



gorilla. She had, as Karla Armbruster described, "reached across the boundary of difference and superiority that Western culture had constructed between itself and the rest of nature."²

Here Di Mauro undertakes a similar, although substantially different project, seeking to destabilise the culture/nature boundary. Rather than immerse himself in nature, attempt to become natural, in the manner of Fossey, Di Mauro mediates the division of culture and nature as a cultural exercise, through the trope of art. Oddly and discursively, the distinction between nature and culture is proffered as the 'natural order' of things. **floccus** encourages you to consider exactly how order exists, its implications and its effects.

Perhaps you will consider your own responses to these suggestive and random shapes, to determine human, animal and vegetal resemblances. They are uncanny, providing an experience which is not wholly strange or unfamiliar. Perceptually, they are recognisable, yet their likeness is elusive. One can experience the uncanny as in-betweenness, between the familiar and the unfamiliar.

Sometimes the 'uncanny' can be disorienting and frightening but, at other times, that in-betweenness might be experienced as 'wonder'. It happens all too rarely, that surprising and pleasurable sensation of marvelling and compelling curiosity. It catches us off-guard, before caution prompts wariness. That sense of wonder draws you closer to something unknown: inquisitive, you might touch it, listen for a heartbeat and breathe its pungent scent. Thus you might experience an other without seeking to assimilate it or consume it, without possessing it or knowing it. These sculptures, despite their likeness, appear to us as different or new. They move us. Wonder at 'the grandeur of life' refuses the hierarchy of binarism of culture and nature.

It would seem that through this art, as a space of wonder, Di Mauro is re-negotiating a relationship, primarily our own complex relationship with nature, as mediated by science and philosophy. These cultural practices and discourses tend to locate 'nature' at the lower end of a hierarchy. However, Di Mauro does not subscribe to the prescriptions

of hierarchy and determinism. He does not argue the primacy of particular ontologies or lifeforms, nor does he paternalistically or custodially advocate on behalf of other living things.

Natural history's concern with classification excludes humanity, while the penultimate creation or cause of evolution is humanity. Despite the discovery that humans share more than 98% of genetic material with two species of chimpanzees, humans, existing separately and distinctly from nature, have come to epitomise culture, having recourse to the divine. Our dealings with nature are characterised as chaotic, catastrophic, sublime and savage.

Natural history, as a science, orders the unruly and unpredictable. According to Jared Diamond, "between ourselves and all other species lies a seemingly unbridgeable gulf that we acknowledge by defining a category called 'animals.'³ The effect is that creatures as diverse as "centipedes, chimpanzees and clams"⁴ are thought to not only have more shared characteristics with each other than with humans, but also lack those features typical to humans. Such accounts of life on this planet entail a certain conceit. As Stephen Jay Gould argues, these narratives rely

upon the fallacy that evolution embodies a fundamental trend or thrust leading to a primary and defining result ... That crucial feature, of course, is progress - operationally defined in many different ways as a tendency for life to increase in anatomical complexity, or neurological elaboration, or size and flexibility of behavioural repertoire, or any criterion obviously concocted ... to place *Homo sapiens* atop a supposed heap.⁵

Di Mauro seeks to undo some of this arbitrary and self-serving conceit through his symbolic language. The fibrous underlay provides a generic language which undermines the mania of taxonomy and classification. These analoguous forms reveal the artifice of order. Subsequently, **floccus** suggests something else, not unlike what philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari describe as 'becoming':

Becoming is a rhizome, not a classificatory or genealogical tree. Becoming is certainly not imitating, or identifying with something; neither is it regressing-progressing; neither is it corresponding, establishing corresponding relations; neither is it producing, producing a filiation or producing through filiation. Becoming is a verb with a consistency all its own; it does not reduce to or lead back to, "appearing," "being," "equaling," or "producing."⁶

These philosophers are concerned with multiplicity and difference: accordingly, becoming and multiplicity are the same thing, continually transforming, in symbiosis. For Deleuze and Guattari, "a fiber stretches from a human to an animal, from a human or an animal to molecules, from molecules to particles, and so on to the imperceptible."⁷

It is the transformative processes of connectivity and crossing implicit in symbiosis that Di Mauro is embracing with his cluster of sculptural forms. He has not defined a hierarchy of life/forms but rather has created a space so that we might wonder at them. He has acknowledged a heterogeneity (or multiplicity) in which organisms and particles are both different and connected. In a world comprised of symbiotic relations, there is no natural order, only 'the grandeur of life'; only bio-diversity.

Linda Carroli

¹ Alison Kubler, "Manifestation", catalogue for *Manifestations*, an exhibition by Sebastian Di Mauro, Beatty Gallery, 1998, unpaginated

² Karla Armbruster, "Surely God, These Are My Kin: The Dynamics of Identity and Advocacy in the Life and Works of Dian Fossey" in Jennifer Ham and Matthew Senior (eds), *Animal Acts: Configuring the Human in Western History*, Routledge, New York, 1997, p 214

³ Jared Diamond, *The Rise and Fall of the Third Chimpanzee*, Vintage, London: 1992 (2nd edition 1991), p 1

⁴ *ibid.*, p 1

⁵ Stephen Jay Gould, *Life's Grandeur: The Spread of Excellence from Plato to Darwin*, Vintage, London 1997, p 19-20

⁶ Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1987, p 239

⁷ *ibid.*, p 249

curriculum vitae

ACADEMIC QUALIFICATIONS

- 1993-1996 Master of Arts (Visual Arts), Monash University
1990-1991 Graduate Diploma of Arts, (Visual Arts), Monash University
1987 Bachelor of Arts, Queensland College of Art, Brisbane

SELECTED SOLO EXHIBITIONS

- 2000 *Noccus*, Brisbane City Gallery, Brisbane
1999 *Respirare*, Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane
1998 *Pane e Zucchero*, Cairns Regional Gallery, Cairns
1997 *Manifestations*, Beatty Gallery, Sydney
1996 *Slippage*, Beatty Gallery, Sydney
SKiN, Ipswich Regional Art Gallery, Ipswich
Pagine dal Libro Muto, Grahame Galleries, Brisbane
Between Material, Switchback Gallery, Monash University, Gippsland Campus, Churchill, Victoria
1995 *Pagine dal Libro Muto*, Beatty Gallery, Sydney
1994 *Underlay*, Beatty Gallery, Sydney
1993 *Praeparatio Physica*, Omniscent Gallery, Brisbane
evanescence, Space Plentitude, Brisbane
1992 *IMbalance*, Ipswich Regional Art Gallery, Ipswich
1991 *Transference*, Above the Apothecary, Brisbane
1990 *being-BECOMING*, Roz MacAllan Gallery, Brisbane
1989 *Passage*, Roz MacAllan Gallery, Brisbane
1987 *Transience*, Roz MacAllan Gallery, Brisbane

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 1999 *Wish You Were Here*, Smith + Stoneley Gallery, Brisbane
Enjoin, Cairns Regional Gallery, Cairns
Formless, Soapbox Gallery, Brisbane
1998 *Enjoin*, GSIS Museum, Manila, Philippines
excat, Smith + Stoneley Gallery, Brisbane
Im/material, Soapbox Gallery, Brisbane

- 1997 *Wachs*, Soapbox Gallery, Brisbane
Das Subject, Soapbox Gallery, Brisbane
1996 *Diverse Alliances*, Ecole D'Art, Noumea
The Toowoomba Biennial Acquisitive Fine Art Award and Exhibition, Toowoomba Regional Art Gallery, Toowoomba
Queensland Artists Books, Brisbane City Gallery, Brisbane
das object, Whitebox Gallery, Brisbane
Visibility, Beatty Gallery, Sydney
Masculinity, Bauhaus Gallery, Brisbane
1995 *Paper*, Queensland Museum, Brisbane
Have a Look, University Art Museum, University of Queensland
Brisbane Contemporary Australian Works from the Collection, Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane
A Selection from the Downlands Art Collection, Toowoomba Regional Art Gallery, Toowoomba
1994 *FOI - Festival Of Installation*, Noosa Regional Gallery, Tewantin
Beat The Drum - Assemblages, Beatty Gallery, Sydney
Reference Points, Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane
The River Styx (Sticks), An Australian-New Zealand Artist's Book Project, National Library of Australia, Canberra
Brisbane/Hanoi Exchange Project, Queensland College of Art, Brisbane & Hanoi University, Hanoi, Vietnam
1993 *Sculpture in Wood*, Museum of Contemporary Art, Brisbane
1991 *Aberdare Art Prize*, Ipswich Regional Art Gallery, Ipswich
1990 *Melbourne Contemporary Art Fair*, Roz MacAllan Gallery, Melbourne
Crossing Over, University of Southern Queensland, Toowoomba
Above the Apothecary, Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane
1989 *Not Another Archibald Prize*, Roz MacAllan Gallery, Brisbane
1988 *Artists as Designers*, Roz MacAllan Gallery, Brisbane
1987 *THAT Group Exhibition*, Museum of Contemporary Art, Brisbane

COLLECTIONS

- Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane
James Hardy Collection, State Library of Queensland, Brisbane
Mackay City Library, Mackay
Museum of Contemporary Art, Brisbane
Logan College of TAFE, Queensland
Artbank, Sydney
Brisbane City Gallery, Brisbane
Queensland Symphony Orchestra, Brisbane
Allied Queensland Coalfields Ltd, Brisbane
Art Gallery of Western Australia, Perth
Gadens Ridgeway
University of Southern Queensland, Toowoomba
Attorney General's Department, Queensland
Downlands College, Toowoomba
Toowoomba Regional Art Gallery
Australian Construction Services, Department of the Arts and Administrative Services, Brisbane
Sly and Weigall Solicitors, Brisbane
Queensland Cement Limited, Brisbane
Global Arts Link Ipswich

GRANTS AND AWARDS

- 1999 New Work Grant, Australia Council for the Arts
1996 Project Grant, Arts Queensland, Qld State Government
1991 Aberdare Art Prize, Ipswich Regional Art Gallery, Ipswich
1990 Logan Art Award, Painting, Logan
1989 Artist of the Year, Queensland Symphony Orchestra

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Magon, J. 1991, "Sebastian Di Mauro and Wayne Smith: Roz MacAllan Gallery, Brisbane," *Eyeline*, No. 14, Autumn, p34
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Oorloff, R. 1987, "Sebastian Di Mauro Roz MacAllan Gallery", *Eyeline* No. 2, August, p31.
Petersen, L. 1994, *The River Styx (Sticks) An Australian-New Zealand Artists Book Project*, Raft Press Incorporated, Canberra.
Smith, S. 1993, "An arena of magic, ritual and mystery", *The Courier Mail*, Saturday, October 23, p25.
Smith, T. 1996, *SKiN*, Ipswich Regional Art Gallery, Ipswich.
Spark, S. 1995, "Sebastian Di Mauro", *Have a Look*, University Art Museum, University of Queensland, p10, p11.
Szulakowska, U. 1998, *Experimental Art in Queensland 1975 - 1995*, Griffith University, Nathan, pp65, 146.
Zurbrugg, N. 1994, "Sebastian Di Mauro Praeparatio Physica", *Agenda*, No. 35 March, p20.

