



THE SHAPE OF AIR

ESSAY | MARY KNIGHTS

'The darkness was deathly absolute. I could not distinguish one shape or object. I could not see my own body. I could not get any sense of anything out there. I was in a great black vacuum.'¹

On stepping out of the lifts at level 16 of the l'Hôtel Dauphin, the protagonist of Haruki Murakami's novel *Dance, Dance, Dance*, unexpectedly finds himself in a dark and formless zone. Without the anticipated minimal proportions of the modern hotel corridor with low ceiling, flickering neon lights and regularly spaced doors that muffled an occasional cough or sigh, he is disoriented in time and space and dislocated from the world as he knew it.

The objects, spaces and structures that surround us, and how we relate to their physical attributes such as shape, scale, density, and mass, profoundly impact on our sense of being and understanding of reality. The works in 'The Shape of Air' engage with concerns such as the impact of the object on the space or architectural enclosure that surrounds it, positive and negative shapes, and the relationship established between object and viewer.

Constructed from wire cubes stacked systematically into a huge three-dimensional grid-form, Neil Taylor's sculptural installation *Playpen* contains and dissects space. Although the minimal structure is built from multiples of a basic cube-shaped component and made from an intrinsically prosaic industrial material, it is strangely idiosyncratic and alluring. The form simultaneously draws attention to the airy internal spaces while denying access to them. Slight irregularities of the wire



lines interrupt the harsh formality of the work. Intriguingly, the form and internal spaces seems to dissolve into graphic linear patterns which shift when approached.

Digitally manipulated imagery printed on reams of heavy satin-gloss paper cascade down the gallery wall in Geoff Parr's *Air Born*. Creating an intense sense of vertigo, the unfurling paper, caught as reflections in mirror-boxes, appears to plunge through the floor undermining the solid integrity of the gallery space.

While Parr has used digital photographs of clouds and sky as his primary source of imagery, the computer-generated patterning disrupts any allusion to Romantic landscapes or transcendental experience. Like a mirage, the vestiges of natural forms fragment and dissolve, enveloping the viewer in a gauzy field of blurring colour when the work is approached. The optical shimmer created by the patterning and the dissipation of illusionary space draws attention to physiological mechanisms of sight and how we perceive and visually interpret information about the world around us.

By meticulously weaving a thread between fixed points, Sandra Selig maps out a graceful, almost intangible form, which resonates in space like visible sound waves. Sandra Selig's ephemeral installation object (*tint*) is site-specific. It defines a form that is coherent but insubstantial - like an architectural drawing drafted on a computer screen. Despite the absence of weight or mass, the precise lyrical form transforms the space and draws attention to the architectural features of the gallery.

Colin Langridge's cigar-shaped sculpture seems to be lodged precariously at a steep angle between the floor and ceiling of the gallery. Made from raw planks of radiata pine shaped into elegant curves, the sculpture titled *Almost*, while suggestive of familiar objects such as a boat or cocoon, is essentially idiosyncratic and defies definition.

Nearby, *In Memory*, a fluted cone crafted from Tasmanian oak, balances on a sharp steel-tipped point. It hovers, threatening to topple. Because of the apparent instability of these solidly constructed objects, a heightened sense of awareness of their presence within the space is elicited. Influenced by his readings of Martin Heidegger, Langridge has endeavoured to create objects that impart a sense of being rather than convey a specific meaning, and which "highlight the unresolved tension that continues to exist between the disciplines of ontology and epistemology."²

Langridge has used the relationships between objects, space and viewer to investigate abstract ideas about knowledge and being. Other artists in 'The Shape of Air' use the impact of the



physical attributes of sculptural objects to evoke an emotional or spiritual response; articulate spiritual beliefs; allude to the possibility of intangible realities or other dimensions beyond a material realm.

A recurring theme in Sebastian Di Mauro's work is the alchemists' desire to transform base materials into gold. As well as astroturf, Di Mauro has 'transformed' elements as banal as carpet underlay, electric blankets and charred wood in his exploration of metaphysical ideas such as transience, immortality and humanity's inextricable interconnectedness with the ecosystem.

The bizarre juxtaposition of seething form and raw inorganic material is provocative. Di Mauro's *Astroturf* appears to erupt out of the floor like an enormous fresh tip of asparagus or probing tongue. The organic form with its plump curves has a strong physical presence and sensual beauty which is strangely enhanced, and complicated, by its synthetic skin of vivid green astroturf.

In Roslynd Piggott's poignant piece *Arranged meeting – breath of two men*, two fragile glass alembics are suspended behind a glass window. Each holds a breath of air. The alembics were blown by two men who once knew each other well but are now separated. One lives in England and the other in Australia.

It is impossible for the breaths to mingle. Not quite touching, suspended in space, the gap between the alembics emphasises absence and the distance between the men. Each transparent glass form is engraved with details of the moment in time and the place where they were made, when the breath was captured. Although containing nothing but a breath of air, the alembics are imbued with loss, desire, memory and hope.





Mick Kubarkku carves lithe wooden figures with characteristically strong profiles and paints them with natural pigments to represent ethereal spiritual beings. Tall and very thin, these yawkyawk and mimih spirit figures relate to the mythology of Aboriginal groups living in western and southern Arnhem Land. Yawkyawk or water spirits live in fresh water streams in Arnhem Land and have tails like fish. Mimih spirits are believed to have existed before humans and to inhabit rocky country in Arnhem Land. They can be mischievous, and have special powers such as being able to slip into a rock face. While they do not usually interfere with Aboriginal communities, they occasionally steal people away into their spirit realm. Yawkyawk and mimih spirits have been depicted frequently in rock art for thousands of years and carved as wooden figures since the 1960s.

Contemplative and imbued with a tranquil beauty, Hossein Valamanesh often uses objects which refer to everyday rituals, identity and patterns of nature in his work. Drawing inspiration from his Persian cultural heritage as well as his experiences as a migrant in Australia, his works are poetic and seem to evoke a mystical experience of the world. In his piece *Chai, as close as I could get*, a glass of chai floats in a pool of water lit from below. Though made of simple mass-produced objects, the glass with its amber-coloured fluid appears to levitate in a radiant light.

Despite these artists' diverse materials and points of departure, they share a fundamental concern: an interest in the impact of the object on the space around it. Form determines our understanding of reality, our sense of being – as Murakami's protagonist discovered when he stepped out of the hotel elevator into nothingness...

I was reduced to pure concept. My flesh had dissolved; my form had dissipated. I floated in space. Liberated of my corporeal being, but without dispensation to go anywhere else. I was adrift in the void.³

¹ Haruki Murakami, *Dance, Dance, Dance*, New York: Vintage International: 1995, p74

² Colin Lengnoge, Artist's notes, Hobart 2002, p4

³ Marniegrida website, www.bu.aust.cmi/~marniegrida, 30/3/02



ESSAY | DAVID HANSEN

'In the Aristotelian world view, matter fills every crevice, and space is just the set of boundaries that separates one material thing from another.'¹

One of the most celebrated sculptures of classical antiquity is the Apoxyomenos, Lysippos's figure of a naked athlete cleaning himself. The work is mentioned by Pliny in his *Natural History* (XXIV. 61-62), and is well known from Roman and later copies, most notably the 1st century A.D. marble in the Vatican Museums:

What is distinctive about this statue is not just the clear, bright symmetry of its canonical (and mathematically-calibrated) physical beauty. It is not just the casual, sexual grace of the tilted hips, as the boy shifts his weight from one foot to another. It is also most notably (and innovatively, in terms of contemporary Greek sculpture) the quality of reach, the way in which the right arm cuts away from frontality, stretching forwards, towards, away, measuring the figure's space. It signals other viewpoints, circumspection:

It is as if the gesture of the extended arm is one of command. Its inter-spatial salute requires that you move, that you watch (and admire) the way that the naked musculature swells and slides and shifts and settles from sightline to sightline. The figure of the athlete strikes out of the block, out of sculpture's monumental and architectural origins and into full (human) spatiality. It acquires its own measure, its own physics. As you walk around it, it stretches and compresses, hides and reveals.

Where does the sculpture stop, and what happens at the point where it does? There is transformation and definition, fracture and linkage, a strange plastic-elastic meniscus. It shimmers. It burns. It sings.

To enhance their beauty (and their blessing), the golden youths of Greece would anoint themselves, covering their bodies with olive oil before competition. Lysippos's athlete is shown removing the oil, the dust of the arena and the sweat of the encounter with a body scraper, a *stlēngis* or *strigil*. The arm addressing space is underscored by the gesture and the instrument. In the stroke of the *stlēngis* dragging down the triceps of the extended limb, the sculpture traces its own profile, which is the inner edge of space. The momentary contour of skin describes the edge of the world, the shape of air.

This is the function and quality of sculpture explored in this exhibition: the experience of negative space in three dimensions. All around a sculpture, as subject or as object, there is nothing. From the line drawn by your optical body scraper across the surface of the work, from this thin barrier of light reflecting off string or wood or steel or cloth extends an open world, an immeasurable distance. Sculpture controls that awful, passive, infinite extension by gathering it up at its boundary. As the flow of air and light circles around the sculptural form, ripples bounce back, pushing the character of the work outwards into the viewer's space.

Thus Mick Kubarkku's *Yavkyawik* and *Mimih* figures appear at first sight to be compressed by the surrounding air: attenuated, spotty apparitions, barely there, like figures in a mirage. But as you move closer in and further away and around and behind them, they begin to make a broader claim, to assert their skinny persistent authority, to occupy a greater space, to galvanize the air. In its attentive or even submissive forward lean or lick, Sebastian di Mauro's *Astrofirt* also seems at first to be squeezed into itself, the filling for a sleeve or a fold in space. Yet the latent sexuality of its contours, its suggestion of a fragment or close up of part of a human body makes the work bristle with energy, a frisson made explicit and intensified by the synthetic shimmer of the astrofurf surface. Colin Langridge's *Almost* (almost a cigar, almost a canoe, almost a banana, almost a barrel, almost a pod...) is open at both ends, allowing the aether to flow right through, but the carefully-calculated strangeness of the form turns it, too, into a conductor, a valve, a signal. The electric charge of the curious shape is further enhanced by the work's forty-five degree balance. The suspension is disconcerting, vertiginous.

As Langridge's hollow form shows, there is no requirement for solidity, for mass. Volume is enough to activate the negative space in the third dimension. As Rodin's





teacher Constant Simon told him: "Never consider a surface except as the extremity of a volume, as the point, more or less large, which it directs toward you."² Bare articulation of X, Y and Z axes will give you spatial control. Geoff Parr's *Air Barn* is all done with smoke (or rather clouds) and mirrors. With two aligned planes and three Juddian boxes, a pivellation and a reflection meeting it at ninety degrees, he makes the ground drop away, revealing a pool of sky through the floor, a slice of heaven cleaving the horizon.

Neil Taylor's *Playpen* is a regular heaven warehouse. The air is neatly stacked in a rectilinear lattice of steel wire. Taylor models a full X-Y-Z grid, with an austere avoidance of other reference. We look at and along and around and through emptiness, a cubic hive of light and lines. Sandra Selig's geometries are more complex, her multiple-point perspectives forming ghostly baroque curls and folds. Her work's profiles are created by the darkening proximity of parallel and convergent threads; these lines of tonal definition skate across the installation space in a humming curvature, like that of electricity wires seen surging and bouncing through a car window.



Just as the volumetric can collude with the linear, so it can be suggestive of the parallel threads and convergences of the invisible, of feeling. The surface can also be "a point (directed) toward you" from a more extended volume of story and emotion. Within Roslynd Piggott's *Arranged meeting - breath of two men*, the demarcation between local, personal air (two teardrops of separation, two lungfuls of life) and general atmosphere is fine, fragile and transparent, a window of memory and relationship. We can see through, but the air is invisible within as without; the self is a void suspended in a void. Hossein Valamanesh addresses the heart by the manipulation of profile. In his *Dreamtime*, the too-long pillow signifies absence and longing by the extension of the perceptual horizon, its empty edge, its seam with the air.

Whether architectural model or visceral lump, obsessive accumulation or systematic production, light or fat, performed or recorded action, all sculptural practices to some degree address this quality of extension, edge and intersection. The works in this exhibition are significantly grounded in or stimulated by this consciousness of the shape in the matrix of space. Self, skin and beyond; form, surface and beyond. It is archetypal; it is modernist. It is there in all acts of encounter; it is there in Rodin's energised edges of gesture, in the mirror surface disappearances of Brancusi, in Giacometti's crushing blocks of air, in Moore's knife edge, in Kline's leap into the void, in Fabro's lines making space, in Heizer's clean slices of earth, in Serra's tilting blades. And it is there in the stengis blade, still drawing towards you.

¹ Margaret Wertheim, *The Pearly Gates of Cyberspace: a history of space from Dante to the Internet*. Doubleday, Sydney, 1999. p.100

² Quoted in Herbert Read, *The Art of Sculpture (The A. W. Mellon Lectures in the Fine Arts, National Gallery of Art, Washington: 1954)*, Princeton University Press, 1956, p.73

THE SHAPE OF AIR | BIOGRAPHIES

SEBASTIAN DI MAURO

1955 Born in Innisfail, Qld
Lives and works in Brisbane
Senior Lecturer, Griffith University, Queensland College of Art

Selected Exhibitions

2001 *National Sculpture Prize*, National Gallery Australia, Canberra
2000 *Floccus*, Brisbane City Art Gallery, Brisbane
1999 *Respirare*, Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane

Selected Bibliography

A. Kubler, 'Manifestation' *Manifestations*, Sebastian Di Mauro, Brisbane, 1997
Timothy Morrell, 'Essay', *Between Material*, Sebastian Di Mauro, Brisbane, 1998

MICK KUBARKKU

1926 Born at Kukabarkku, Mann River district, Arnhem Land
Lives and works in Mann River district

Selected Exhibitions

1995 *Rainbow, Sugarbag and Moon*, Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory, Darwin
1993 *Aratjara*, touring exhibition, Düsseldorf, London and Humlebaek
1990 *Spirit in Land*, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne

Selected Bibliography

Margaret Carew and Judith Ryan, catalogue essay, *Men of High Degree*, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, 1996
A. Garde and P. Tacon, catalogue essay, *Rainbow Sugarbag and Moon Two artists of the stone country: Bardayal Nadjamerrek and Mick Kubarkku*, Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory, Darwin, 1995

COLIN LANGRIDGE

1963 Born in Wollongong, NSW
Lives and works in Hobart

Selected Exhibitions

2001 *The Shed*, CAST Gallery, Hobart
2001 *Sculpture by the Sea*, Tasman Peninsula
1999 *Making Space*, Moores Building, Perth

Selected Bibliography

Anthony Curtis, 'Open', *Togatus*, vol 73, no 1, Hobart, Feb 2002

GEOFF PARR

1933 Born in Sydney, NSW
Lives and works in Hobart

Selected Exhibitions

1996 *Colonial Post Colonial*, Museum of Modern Art, Heide, Melbourne
1988 *Stories of Australian Art*, Commonwealth Institute, London
1985 *Australian Perspectives 85*, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney

Selected Bibliography

Jonathan Holmes, catalogue essay, *The Inaugural Chair in Art*, Art Exhibitions Committee, University of Tasmania, Hobart, 1991
Bernice Murphy, *Australian Perspectives 83*, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, 1983
Peter Quartermaine and Jonathan Watkins, *A Pictorial History of Australian Art*, Bison Books, London, 1989

THE SHAPE OF AIR | ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The curators wish to thank the participating artists and their representatives for generously supporting this exhibition. Particular thanks are also extended to Bill Nuttall and Niagara Galleries, Nellie Castan and Nellie Castan Gallery, the Plimsoll Gallery Committee and Contemporary Art Services Tasmania.

We are especially grateful for the timely and essential assistance provided by our cutting edge sponsors: Avery Partners and Lansdell Glass (Tas) Ltd.

Exhibition Curators: Mary Knights and Heather B. Swann
Writers: David Hansen and Mary Knights
Graphic Designer: Tracey Allen
Exhibition Coordination: Pat Brassington
Printing: Monotone Art Printers, Hobart

© 2002 The artists, authors and the University of Tasmania
ISBN 0 85901 985 3

This exhibition received Exhibition Development Funds from Contemporary Art Services Tasmania.

The University of Tasmania's exhibition program receives generous assistance from the Premier, Minister for State Development, through Arts Tasmania.

Plimsoll Gallery, Centre for the Arts, Hunter Street, Hobart
10 May - 2 June, 2002



UNIVERSITY
of TASMANIA



Tasmania
ARTS TASMANIA



Queensland
Government
Arts Queensland

