# SEBASTIAN DI MAURO

## RESPIRARE

3 JUNE - 26 JUNE 1999

INSTITUTE OF MODERN ART

# RESPIRARE

Sebastian Di Mauro's work characteristically resides in the place between remembering and forgetting, between reminiscence and the inescapable truth of one's own history. At the recent launch of the artist's monograph, BETWEEN MATERIAL, writer Rosemary Crumlin, curator of the challenging BEYOND BELIEF at the National Gallery of Victoria, described her response to Di Mauro's ongoing artistic project as something physical, indeed intensely familiar. She described her personal experience as something akin to a clutch in the pit of the stomach, a gentle jolt of déjà vu as though she had engaged with the work before on a similar level. Crumlin's eloquent articulation so aptly describes the act of looking at Di Mauro's work that it is tempting to describe his compelling installations as bordering on the revelatory. This term is perhaps not too emphatic, as Di Mauro's work has long investigated the realms of the metaphysical and spiritual world in relation to his own biography. With this new body of installation pieces, Di Mauro has returned to the place of his childhood, both literally and metaphorically. The work in RESPIRARE, in the same manner as that illustrated so beautifully in BETWEEN MATERIAL, explores the commonality of human emotional experience, and trades on a certain comfortable familiarity.

Di Mauro's family history is an experience shared by so many migrants who are responsible for a significant part of the colonisation of large tracts of rural Australia. South Johnstone is a sugar-farming town, and Di Mauro's grandfather worked in the industry as that most Aussie icon, a cane farmer. His son, Sebastian's father, also began his working life in the sugar industry before buying a bakery. On a base level everyone is familiar with these food staples, yet they have a special resonance for Di Mauro.

In keeping with his interest in the visceral and the spiritual, Di Mauro has created a series of unique 'sculptures' which take the form of sugar 'mountains', containing wells of olive oil. The small sculptures in RESPIRARE exist as part of a larger installation, but are small entities within themselves. Installed as a group they relate to each other rhythmically, as a sculptural narrative of the artist's biography, or indeed, a memory. Di Mauro describes how these sculptures were inspired by his childhood memories of the sugar silos up north at Mourilyan Harbour- "AT THE TIME IT SEEMED THAT THE CONE OF SUGAR WAS THOUSANDS OF FEET HIGH". For Di Mauro as a child this memory of such an important aspect of his childhood was set. Of course the passage of time distorts the most impressive of memories. RESPIRARE resembles an inversion of this embedded memory: Di Mauro is now a grown man, but now the sugar

piles are smaller, though still abundant.

The olive oil, so fragrant and 'virgin', references Di Mauro's Sicilian heritage and echoes the hopes and aspirations of so many migrant families who sought the harsh rural life for the promise of a new start. The oil has a special relevance as a metaphor for healing for Di Mauro, who remembers his mother using it as an ointment for dry skin. Of course olive oil has become central to the nouveau vogue "Australian" diet. As a nation we have adopted this and so many other aspects of Italian culture that olive oil occupies a place in the collective cultural consciousness. On the gallery walls surrounding this scaled down plantation of sugar hills, Di Mauro has inscribed in charcoal an autobiography of sorts in Sicilian. The text is rich with personal anecdote:

"During our younger years we spent many hours together, and my grandfather would tell us numerous stories about his childhood and his beloved Sicily. About the wonderful orchards he would tend. The blood red cherries thick in the trees beneath the ever active volcano of Mt Etna and of the time during the war when he was nearly killed. Had it not been for his short stature he would have been shot in the head. This story was told to me to appease my worrying concern of my height. My grandfather planted his own vegetable garden in South Johnstone. In this Garden of Eden he planted what seemed to us necessary vegetables. Things such as zucchinis, egg plants, squash, snake beans and of course garlic. But to the Australians they were weird exotic and inedible."

The flowing black text gives representation to the artist's own hand, and is a reminder of how handwriting is in many ways a self-portrait. This 'hands-on touch' lends the narrative a real poignancy, which is heightened by the cadence of the written Italian words. The gentle humility of the script inherits something far more exotic when translated into Sicilian - the language stretches back over time, over unimaginable distances to another country, to connect with a rich and extensive ancient history, bouncing back onto the walls of this gallery space to describe a second generation, Italian experience in rural Queensland. Di Mauro has related how he was brought up speaking Sicilian fluently, but the passing of time has seen it slip from his tongue. For the purpose of RESPIRARE he sought out someone to translate his personal history into Sicilian. The blackness of the charcoal is reminiscent of the black clothes of traditional Italian mourning, and the cultural stereotype of the little Italian momma dressed in black stirring pasta. On the wall Di Mauro writes,

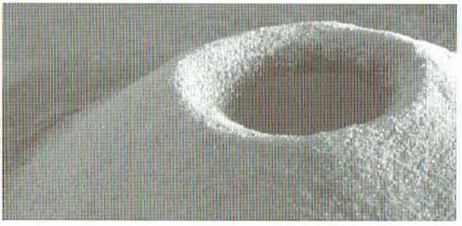
"Elderly Sicilian women wore black when a close member of the family died. Many people could not understand the 'black widows'. Why was there a necessity to mourn the dead for such a long period of time? It was about showing respect for those who died. I can remember my mother talking to my grandmother about the irrelevance of the custom. She said that we lived in a different culture to the one in Italy. It was a constant embarrassment to us (all her grandchildren) when our grandmother was paying respect."

The process of transformation, of change from one state to another is always central to Di Mauro's project. The sugar hills gradually become saturated with oil to form a hard crust on the outside that is surprisingly cool to the touch. Traces of oil seep out gradually on to the carpet underlay beneath forming a natural seal. The purity of the combined, unadulterated elements – the raw sugar, the olive oil – a metaphor for energy contained, lends the highly subjective work a real potency, and immediacy. Installed randomly, these forms exist as an unnatural landscape, both divorced from, and reminiscent of the rich tradition of landscape in Australian art history. With this new work Di Mauro speaks not only of the PHYSICAL landscape, but also of the CULTURAL landscape, as well as the minimalist tradition. The work demands a phenomenological engagement with its presence. With RESPIRARE, Di Mauro has again used carpet underlay for its multi-purpose quality, and its relevance to a common experience. The musty smell of the underlay combines with the aromatic sugar and

olive oil 'loaves' to heady effect, heightening the physical experience that Crumlin described.

The work comes full circle with a 8-millimeter film that projects images of Di Mauro's childhood and his family onto the gallery wall. The coarse colour images from another time picture a halcyon existence, a flickering nostalgia. It is difficult not to feel as though one is being invasive, but the film is so compelling. In the background, Sicilian voices belonging to Di Mauro's father, uncle and aunts rise and fall, as they describe their own experiences of growing up in South Johnstone. For us hungry voyeurs it is frustrating to not understand - instead we must rely on the sounds, which resonate so mellifluously through the space. Ultimately RESPIRARE is about the seduction of one's own heritage. Di Mauro's work articulates the appeal of our own history, of what is intrinsically OURS, and strikes a familiar chord. RESPIRARE as something of a continuation of a theme for Di Mauro, sees the artist embrace his past in the form of a beguiling and intriguing narrative.

ALISON KUBLER



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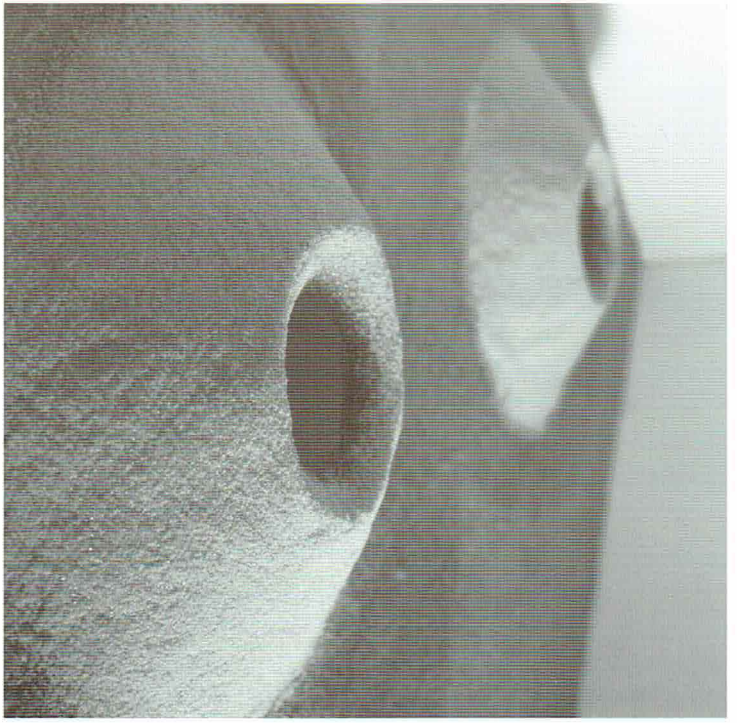

# SEBASTIAN ANTHONY DI MAURO

## PLACE OF BIRTH

Innisfail, Queensland

## 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

1999 'Respirare', Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane

1998 'Pane e Zucchero', Cairns Regional Gallery, Cairns

'Manifestations', Smith & Stoneley Gallery, Brisbane

1997 'Manifestations', Beatty Gallery, Sydney

'Touch', Brisbane City Gallery, Brisbane

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', Omniscient Gallery, Brisbane

'evanescence', Space Plentitude, Brisbane

1992 'IMbalance', Ipswich Regional Art Gallery, Ipswich

1990 'being-BECOMING', Roz MacAllan Gallery, Brisbane

1989 'Passage', Roz MacAllan Gallery, Brisbane

1987 'Transience', Roz MacAllan Gallery, Brisbane

## SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

1999 'Formless', Soapbox Gallery, Brisbane

1998 'Enjoin', GSIS Museum, Manilla, Philippines

'excat', Smith & Stoneley Gallery, Brisbane

'Suite', Smith & Stoneley Gallery, Brisbane

1997 '3 Degrees of Separation', Soapbox Gallery, Brisbane

'Wachs', Soapbox Gallery, Brisbane

1996 'Diverse Alliances', Ecole D'Art, Noumea

'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 'Beware Artists Books', Gladstone Regional Art Gallery, Gladstone

'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

1993 'Environment - Inner and Outer', Queensland Arts Council Gallery, Brisbane

1992 'Sculpture in Wood', Museum of Contemporary Art, Brisbane

1991 'Artists Books', Grahame Galleries, Brisbane

'Aberdare Art Prize', Ipswich Regional Art Gallery, Ipswich

1990 'Melbourne Contemporary Art Fair', Roz MacAllan Gallery, Melbourne

The artist would like to thank the following for their support:
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Gallery Hours Tuesday-Friday 11-5, Saturday 11-4
closed Sunday, Monday and public holidays Admission free

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Designed by Clara Trifunovich, Liveworm Studio.