

Academici

The Australia Council Visual Arts|Crafts Board Rome Studio Residency 1999-2004

The British School at Rome, from its foundation in 1901, welcomed collaboration with Commonwealth countries. Among the earliest sponsors of the School was the architect Herbert Baker, a friend of the School's own architect, Edwin Lutyens, and his generosity and enthusiasm led to the setting up of a scholarship for South African architects. Numerous Australian scholars made the School their Italian base over the years: the name of Dale Trendall stands out as one who after his period as Librarian in the late 1930s, and the publication of his great work on South Italian vases, continued to visit the School from Melbourne, and to encourage numerous young scholars to make the same journey. Archaeologists, ancient historians, art historians, architects and artists in their dozens have set up over the years a close network of contacts with Rome.

It was to build on this long-standing tradition of exchange that the School opened discussions with the Australia Council for the Arts with the aim of setting up a regular scholarship for Australian artists in Rome. The seven handsome artists' studios designed by Lutyens underwent a face-lift and modernisation in 1996. The provision of washing facilities beneath the redesigned mezzanine bedrooms meant that artists no longer had to pad shivering down an open portico on winter mornings to reach the bathroom, nor to sleep in the fumes of their own turpentine or other toxic artists' materials. The attractive new studio units offered artists space of their own in which to work, but in close connection with a lively interdisciplinary community of thirty, with its common table, and its integrated programme of lectures, visits and other activities (it is no coincidence that many of the contributors to this exhibition chose scholars they met here, not just artists but art historians and ancient historians, to write their critical essays). Beyond the heavy doors of the School is both a city and a country richer in culture than any other in the world, and for those who do not wish simply to explore on their own, the regular opportunity beckons to join in visits to sites, exhibitions and locations arranged for the artists and scholars. Regular group shows by the School's artists provide the chance to exhibit work in progress for an Italian and international audience – for Rome is a place to meet not only Italians but the numerous artists from America, Egypt, France, Japan, Germany, Romania, Scandinavia, Spain and the other countries which offer centres for their artists in Rome.

Since the first Australia Council scholar, Andrew Wright-Smith, arrived in March 1999, five years have passed, and over twenty artists have enjoyed the opportunity of three months in Rome. They have enriched the community of a very British institution in Italy, not least in adding to the international and multicultural perspective. No less than four of the scholars have been the children of Italian immigrants to Australia, sometimes, like Sebastian Di Mauro, explicitly exploring issues of identity. It is impossible to characterise them as a group, for the most striking feature is their diversity, working in many media, from traditional (and less traditional) painting, murals, sculpture, and printmaking, to installation, film and photography, to metalwork, jewellery and furniture. This exhibition captures just a sample of that richness and diversity. They have enriched; and they have returned, we hope, enriched. Certainly numerous ties of friendship between countries have been made: the curator of this exhibition, Kit Wise, is an English artist who met his Australian wife while she was researching in the School, and in moving to Melbourne has cemented many of these bonds. Our hope is that this show will not only offer a measure of what has been achieved, but inspire the next generation of Australian Rome scholars.

Professor Andrew Wallace-Hadrill Director, British School at Rome



Casalinga: Answering the Other Question

The Rome Studio Residency offered by the Australia Council began in 1999. It has subsequently allowed over 20 artists to spend up to three months at the British School at Rome (BSR), the Accademia Britannica, a multi-disciplinary research centre located on the edge of the Villa Borghese in Parioli, Rome. As 'academicians' – members of the Accademia Britannica – the Australian artists are part of the unique blend of disciplines and nationalities that characterises the BSR.

The word 'academy' derives from the Greek *akademeia*: 'A gymnasium in the suburbs of Athens, named from the hero Academus... where Plato taught' ¹... The site of 'Academe's Park' ², a 'leafy grove' some distance outside the walls of Athens, in fact a suburban local, was already established as a place for philosophers to gather by the time of Socrates, Plato's master ³. This original academy aimed to cultivate a sympathetic, discursive atmosphere that would both bring together and educate contemporary thinkers in what were seen as 'new' and even revolutionary ideas. This distinct collective of sophists was expansive and accessible, embracing all facets of the intellectual community and occurring in a public place. As Aristophanes perhaps satirises rather than characterises:

Run off to Academe's Park and relax under the sacred olive trees, a wreath of pure white flowers on your head, with a decent well-mannered companion or two.

The popular image of the 'Thinkery', then, was as both a rarefied and cutting-edge verbal environment. Plato's Academy, from which the specific connotation of the word is derived, differed by introducing in parallel to this public gymnasium and park his private residence or *kepos* as a further dimension of the physical structure of the school. We now interpret this *kepos* as a 'little garden', little by Roman standards, in fact at least a couple of acres in size as it accommodated by the time of Polemo rustic cabins in which many of the the members of the Academy lived; as well a central lecture hall, and a shrine to the muses ⁴. Plato's academy, therefore, whilst still operating primarily in the public sphere of Academe's Park, introduced the notion of a home.

The BSR, with its leafy courtyard, terraces, tennis court and gardens bordering on the Villa Borghese is strikingly similar as a meeting place for learned discussion, and as a residence. The process of discussion and intellectual exchange is facilitated at the BSR through formal lectures and group excursions; as well as informal parties, dinners or the simple act of walking in the city with new-found friends. However, finding a shared language for these exchanges is, as with any meaningful social interaction, the crucial first step. In finding a common tongue – a 'house language' or *casalinga* ⁵ – the highly specialised, technical languages of specific academic disciplines may be modified, smoothed for the lay-person to a version perhaps equivalent to the pidgin-Italian adopted by many new residents during their first few weeks in Rome.

These hybrid pidgin modalities can be seen as operating on two levels. They allow the speaker to step back from the heavily theorised discourses of their field and re-formulise, even re-assess notions that they may usually take as read. For the listener,

¹ Henry George Liddell. Robert Scott. *A Greek-English Lexicon*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1940

² See Aristophanes, *Clouds*, in, for example, Aristophanes, *Lysistrata, The Acharnians, The Clouds*. Trans. Alan H. Sommerstein. Penguin, 1973.

³ John Dillon, *The Heirs of Plato, A Study of the Old Academy (347-274 BC)*, Oxford, 2003

⁴ Dillon, *op cit*.

⁵ The Italian *casalinga*, a colloquialism meaning home-made or home-spun, is often used in Australia to designate types of bread or pizza. In the context of the exhibition however, it resonates with the notion of the BSR as a 'home' for cross-disciplinary and cross-cultural verbal discourse; as well as referring to the artists' response to Italy upon returning home: the 'home style', local variation or accent of their work, produced in response to Rome.

⁶ It is also the case that highly original associations and chains of reasoning can develop, through simple misunderstandings of the terms being used (as any of the school's Italian staff will testify); such that a different or 'Other' question may be answered, rather than the one that was actually posed.

⁷ *Oxford Latin Dictionary*. Clarendon Press, 1968.

⁸ *Ibid*.

⁹ Okwui Enwezor, 'The Artist as Producer in Times of Crisis', conference paper for 'Empires, Ruins and Networks: Art in Real Time Culture' held at ACMI, Federation Square, Melbourne in April 2004.

their language is made to evolve, expanding as their vocabulary takes on new and exotic formulations, phrases and resonances. Both processes therefore imply the growth, intellectual as much as verbal, of the parties involved in the discussion⁶.

In a sense, then, the subject in either case is seen to change; and in turn, in subsequently 'speaking' Rome, to extend the notion of Rome itself. A useful metaphor for this may be San Clemente. This ancient church located near the Colosseum is a composite, layered structure that visualises the changing formulations of spiritual life for Romans. A complex architectural etymology reveals four distinct phases in the signifying function of the building – Mithraic, early-Christian, Renaissance and Baroque – that are literally stacked upon each other. The building has extended upwards, extending through re-formulation, its architecture appropriated or 're-spoken' as the foundations for successive phases of religious life.

This sense of inclusiveness, of embracing and extending rather than obliterating the Other, was characteristic of the ancient Romans. Latin *civis* translates as: 'A fellow citizen, fellow countryman; a citizen, countryman, considered in his relationship to the state.'⁷ Similarly:

civitas: An organised community, esp that in which one lives or to which one belongs as a citizen, a state; the persons living in an organised community, the citizens of a state; a State; a town or city; the rights of a citizen, citizenship; the gift of citizenship to single persons; status in Latin, naturalisation.⁸

The granting of citizenship, 'status... naturalisation' was a highly symbolic act, a gift offered to those invited to 'become' Romans. The bestowal of the title 'Roman' therefore operated as a means of embracing and acknowledging significant members of other cultures. In a similar way, the cliché that all roads lead to Rome may be re-interpreted to suggest that all peoples have access to Rome. This tolerance and openness suggests a sense of security and certainty in the 'Roman' way, if such willingness to welcome others was possible.

Such an expansive sensibility presages the contemporary aspiration towards an 'international civil society', as outlined by the theorist and Artistic Director of Documenta XI, Okwui Enwezor. However this later-day intention is acutely aware of the homogenising tendency of globalisation (again, very different to the respect with which Roman colonisation acknowledged the cultures of those it governed), in which unique voices are subsumed by a 'global imperium'⁹ both cultural and political. A kind of super-fluency has developed in contemporary art as a consequence of this, in which culture and theory have become de-territorialised; or, in terms of the increasing commodification and subsequent consumption of the artist, aided and abetted by the trend towards art museums doubling as pleasure-palaces, fashionable.

Maintaining dialect or accent, then – finding a common language for meaningful exchange while still allowing for variety and difference – is the challenge artists face at an international scale; and is the tableau against which the micro-society of the Accademia Britannica is, in the contemporary climate, perceived. As a consequence, the intention in this exhibition has been to explicitly resist the worst extremes of the 'Grand Tour', in which from the eighteenth & nineteenth centuries onwards a privileged, educated elite institutionalised the commodification of culture in a manner that pre-empts the trend towards globalisation.

In doing this, it is important to consider Said's comments on the relationship between culture and empire, when considering the motive of the artist for studying in Rome:

Structures of location and geographical reference appear in the cultural languages of literature, history, or ethnography.... In British culture, for instance, one may discover a consistency of concern in Spencer, Shakespeare, Defoe and Austen that fixes socially desirable, empowered space in metropolitan England or Europe and connects it by design, motive and development to distant and peripheral worlds (Ireland, Venice, Africa and Jamaica), conceived of as desirable but subordinate.¹⁰

While it is important to acknowledge that Rome is in many senses the antithesis of the 'peripheral' or 'subordinate': the appropriation of histories (as with art-historical or archaeological relics) can become effectively a colonising drive under the guise of cultural tourism, in which stereotypes are both projected upon the countries visited, and elicited from them in exchange for patronage. This romanticised, commodified and ambivalent notion of the Other is, as Homi Bhaba points out 'one of the most significant discursive and psychical strategies of discriminatory power'.¹¹

Instead, the works selected reflect not the romanticisation of the artists' experience of Rome; but attempt to consider how the artists' time as residents at the BSR may have influenced, changed, realigned or restructured the artists' practices. In a sense: how Rome has spoken to them, rather than how they speak of Rome – and subsequently, how their visual language may now demonstrate the residue of this discourse.

A second thread reflecting this privileging of dialogue is that the essays associated with the works in the exhibition have been written not by the curator, but by people who had or still have a major influence on the artists while they were in Rome. These range from fellow resident-artists; Roman artists; academics from other fields, both within Australia and overseas; authors encountered in Italy; or more simply, significant friends. The show aims to document these small-scale, local gestures that establish bridges and relationships, that, as Paul Virillio describes, allow us to 'find warmth' from each other within an increasingly cold and 'ahuman' globalised environment.

The exhibition, then, is a record of hospitality, consciously designating a certain social and civil space as the space of art; and an attempt to consider what Enwezor describes as 'global commons' that the School makes apparent: to recognise that the so called post-colonial is no longer geographically specific, but our collective condition and responsibility. To conclude with Said's lively directive that encapsulates both the experience of Rome, and of living at the School:

Cultural experience or indeed every cultural form is radically, quintessentially hybrid, and if it has been the practice in the West since Emmanuel Kant to isolate cultural and aesthetic realms from the worldly domain, it is now time to rejoin them.

Kit Wise Honours Course Co-ordinator and Studio Co-ordinator of Drawing, Faculty of Art & Design, Monash University

¹⁰ Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, London 1993

¹¹ Homi K. Bhaba, 'The Other Question: The Stereotype and Colonial Discourse', from *The Sexual Subject: A Screen Reader in Sexuality*. London & New York, 1992.

¹² Edward Said, *op cit*.

Sebastian Di Mauro Between the lecture theatre foyer and the entrance to the kitchen at the British School at Rome lies a large sheet of travertine, exposed to the elements. Not an archaeological find as one might suppose, given one aspect of the institution's activities, but the remains of a work of art by Sebastian Di Mauro that was installed in the foyer and then dismantled at the end of the March Mostra of 2004. A piece of marble that took eight men to move was not going to be easy to transport back to Australia as the works of so many other Australia Council Resident artists' had been. And yet it is somehow suitable that this crucial element – indeed, the core – of Sebastian's installation should stay behind when he himself went back to Australia, because like the Italian forbears whose experience is a major inspiration to him, it once formed part of the fabric of the land. The olive oil in which Sebastian wrote the story of a child born in a new country from parents of the old world has long since faded from the surface of this abandoned piece of marble, but its impermanence is curiously indicative of the fluctuating nature of experience and identity, not only of the migrant but also of the individual in a mutable world. Beautifully crafted, the woven surfaces of his artworks are redolent of a culture where objects were made by hand, authentic and characteristic, and his imagery of boats and water expresses the idea of voyaging, not just of those who relinquished their homeland for the promise of a better life, but of any human being, including the artist himself, who continually moves forward, discovering new worlds, incorporating the old with the new, and who creates something unique and valuable from these journeys. Sebastian's great ability is to be able to transform cultural memories into complex and highly inventive works of art. The unusual and often surprising materials that he uses – ashes, oil, turf, sand – combine to create artworks that can be understood and appreciated purely in terms of design and technique, but that manage to contain profound meanings which take them beyond the purely aesthetic, or novel, into a world of experience, deeply personal and at the same time universal.

¶ **Dr Sue Russell** Assistant Director, British School at Rome; Art historian

Sebastian Di Mauro, *Pulvere*, 2006, woven digital prints, olive oil, ash, travertine and paper, dimensions variable. Courtesy of Diane Lanzar Gallery.



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Rome Studio Residency 1999-2004

A Faculty of Art & Design exhibition
Proudly supported by the Australian Council for the Arts
and the British School at Rome

17 March – 13 April 2005

Faculty Gallery
Faculty of Art & Design
Monash University, Caulfield Campus
900 Dandenong Road
Caulfield East VIC 3145
Australia

Monday – Friday 9am – 5pm, Saturday 1 – 5pm

19 May – 6 June 2005

British School Gallery
British School at Rome
Accademia Britannica
61 Via Gregorci
00197 Rome
Italy

Monday – Friday 4.30 – 7.30pm

Curator: Kit Wise, Honours Course Co-ordinator and Studio Co-ordinator
of Drawing, Faculty of Art & Design, Monash University

Artists Tom Alberts, Vito Billa, Angela Cavalleri, Alex Gawronski,
Anne Mary, Euan Heng, Timothy Hoin, David Keeling, Simone Mangos,
Sebastian di Mauro, Christine Morrow, Niki, Alex Pittendrigh, Valeria Tripp,
Catherine Truman, Geoffrey Weary, Andrew Wright-Smith, Alexander Zubryn

Catalogue Design: Mary Callahan

Catalogue published by Faculty of Art & Design, Monash University

ISBN 0 9756060 7 7

National Library of Australia
cataloguing-in-publication data:

Wise, C. J. E. (Christopher James Edward), 1975 –
Academic1 : the first five years of the Australia Council
Visual Arts/Crafts Board Rome Studio Residency, 1999-2004.

ISBN 0 9756060 7 7.

1. Art - Exhibitions - Catalogs. 2. Artists.
I. Wallace-Madrill, Andrew. II. Monash University. Faculty of
Art and Design, Gallery. III. Title.

700

Acknowledgements:

Kit Wise wishes to thank the participating artists and writers for their
commitment, enthusiasm and support of the exhibition. Most sincere thanks
also to Professor Andrew Wallace-Madrill and Dr Sue Russell, Jacopo Benci,
Aldise di Gullio, Geraldine Wellington, Fulvio Astolfi, Richard Wastell and
Rosemary O'Rourke; Bianca Durrant, Mary Callahan, Professor Bernard
Hoffert, Associate Professor Euan Heng, Rachel Arndt, Andrew Lacombe,
Kirzani Freeman, Michael Bullock and Sarah Hyslop.

(from p.22)

For Alex Pittendrigh

Before,
A scratch in the wood, Plaster, Pebbles. A drop that wears through the stone,
The flame of a candle, Hardly flickering,
Ashes in the fireplace, A bread crumb in the pocket, A shadow stretches on the snow,
The natural drift of things.
Then,
Forms are outlined on the surface,
Who brought them? Writing, or leaves on a branch? Maybe I have seen them already,
Maybe it was a long time ago. And who saw what, really?
A little story, Heard already,
It tells of having seen,
Or, in someone else's dream, someone who, removing the dust from the
surface, reads the images,
Explains everything, by heart, Like the magician with the wand,
That is told by the gestures, by the tone of the voice,
All is clear,
But it is a language never heard before, Or forgotten already.
Until the awakening,
Still we, the ignorant ones, look at the flame of a candle,
They pass by, They more pass by,
There are new shavings in the fireplace, There is a new scratch in the wood.

Antonio Capaccio Painter, writer and curator