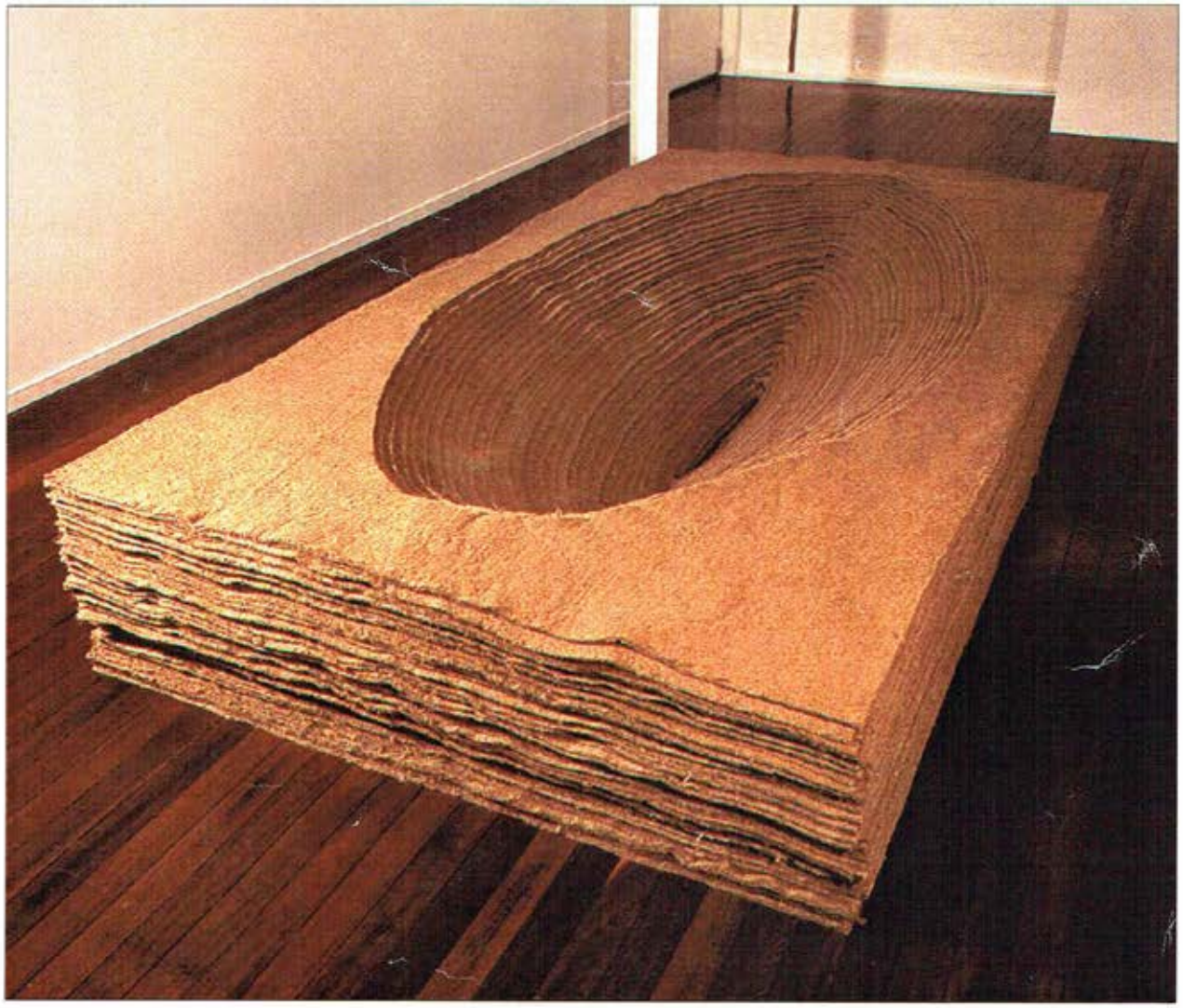
SEBASTIAN DI MAURO: TOWARDS A SOUL ECOLOGY

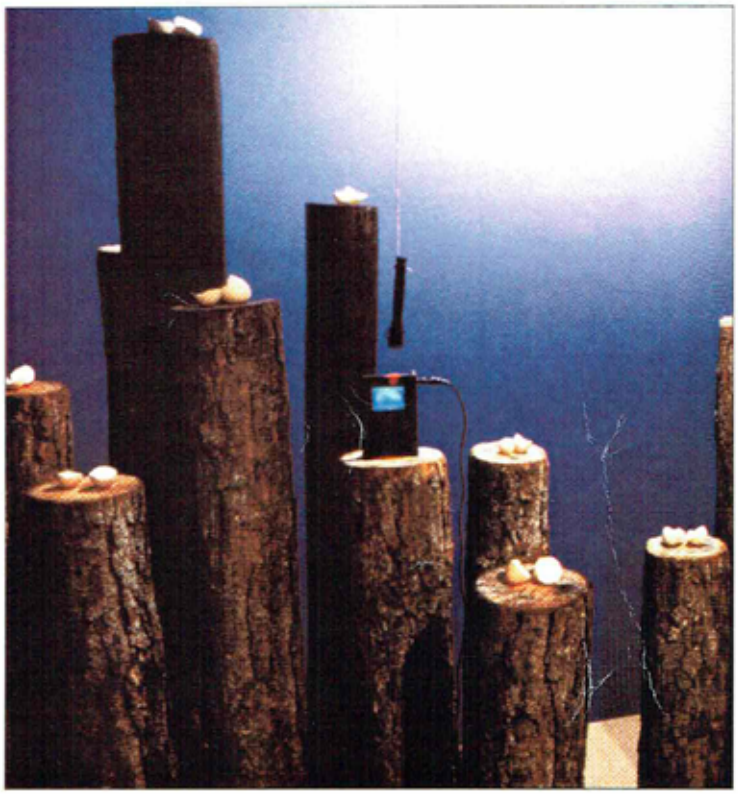
Sebastian Di Mauro is acutely sensitive
to the physical character of what he uses for making art.
Interview by Caroline Anderson.



Sebastian Di Mauro, 'Interval', 1995-1996, installation.
Carpet underlay 48 x 183 x 350 cm
Photograph: Chris Stacy

Art moved in a new direction in the nineties when installation art became the favoured mode of the artist. The viewer can now enter into spaces temporarily transformed by the artist to trigger thoughts, feelings and reflections bearing on who they are, and who we are'. This is the direction Brisbane based artist Sebastian Di Mauro has chosen. He believes strongly in a new 'soul ecology', which he claims is 'where the fields of psychology, ecology and art overlap'. Often using the simplest of objects, Di Mauro's work supports his quest for this new soul ecology, which he says, 'involves our responsibility to the things of the world based on appreciation, affection and relatedness'.

The artist has always used his art as an important vehicle for 'the return of the soul'. Di Mauro suggests 'it helps us in the necessary experience of being vacant, emptied out, and ultimately arresting our attention'. In silencing the world momentarily, it provides an occasion for contemplation. Comparing the differences between art and reason, Di Mauro claims art provides us with images that assist us to



Sebastian Di Mauro, 'Imbalance', 1992, installation at the Ipswich Regional Gallery. Harvest logs, video, torch,batteries and egg shells. 300 x 370 x 240 cm Photograph: Brett Goodman

understand life's mysteries. Art that can be entered into provokes an engagement with the viewer's social, spiritual or emotional experience.

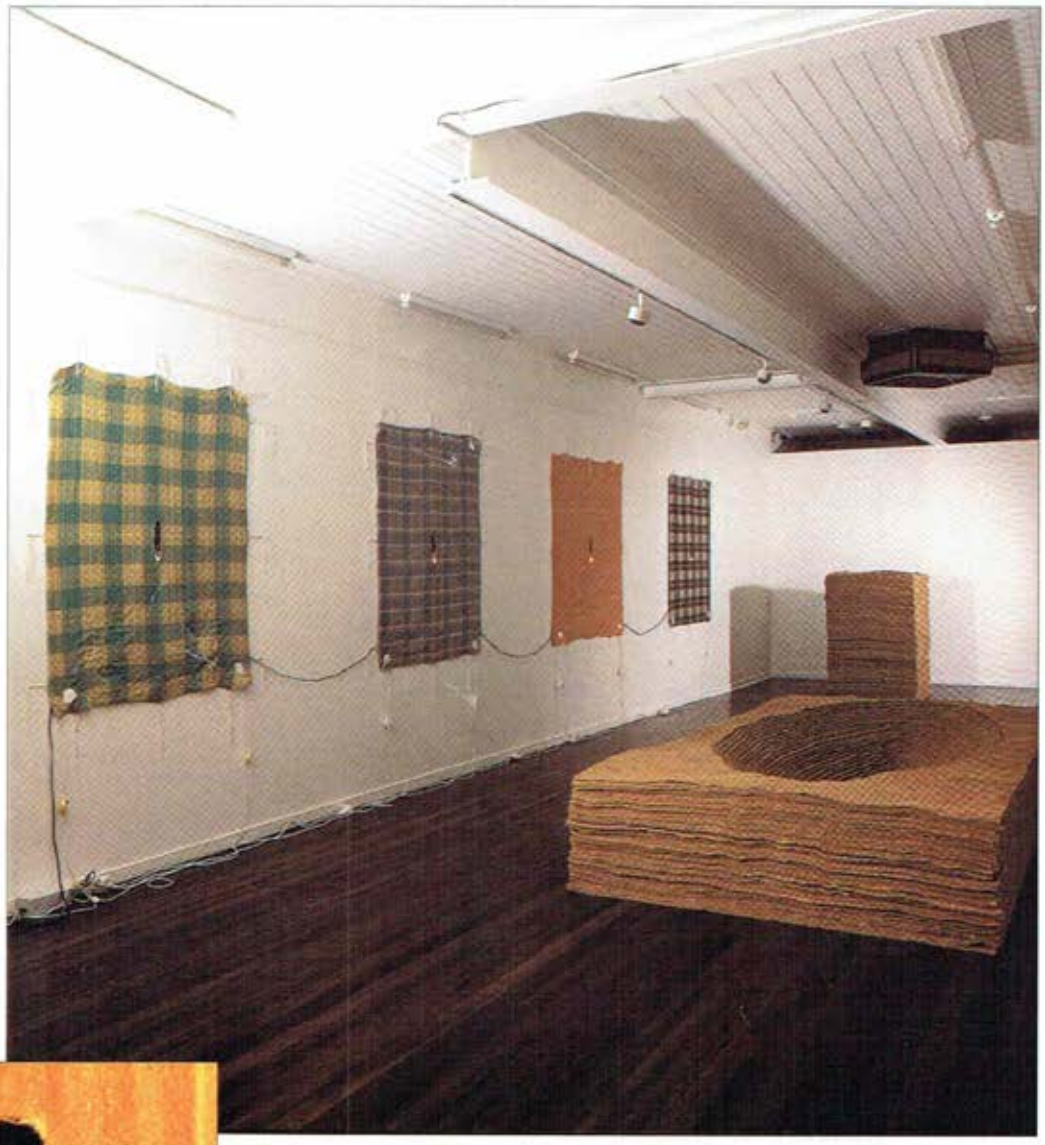
Di Mauro has often mentioned his enthusiasm for Eastern philosophies, belief in an afterlife, ecological concerns, interest in Aboriginal Australia, and a wish to express his Italian heritage. These personal interests, he claims, are symptomatic of Australian society generally, claiming they 'comprise a veritable time-capsule of counter-cultural awareness in our era'.

While there is nothing specifically religious in his work, Di Mauro feels he has gone beyond his religious instruction, and his work is about spirituality from within rather than imposed dogma. Having been a student of Hinduism, Buddhism (Japanese and Chinese) and Shinto this has made him question Catholicism, and possibly all religions to ask the question, ' where do I fit in?'. In Zen Buddhism he appreciates the concept of plants, animals and human beings as being equal, going so far as to suggest 'a tree is as important as I am'. He was also interested in the Tattvic elements with their use of water and pigments, and Theosophy, which brought Eastern thought to the West. Di Mauro became excited about Shinto, during a visit to Japan, as Shinto encompasses a range of gods, respect for the elements and nature. During his annual pilgrimage to a quiet beach, Di Mauro's conceptual work develops 'after a lot of healing and cleansing'.

Death he believes is a transition, and is crucial to the understanding of his work. In 1981, the artist had a near-death experience following a car accident. According to art historian Dr Jane Magon, who specialises in spirituality in art, Di Mauro's experience, which was a kind of mystical initiation, has developed into ecological interests as an outcome of 'healing the self, others, the environment and the cosmos.

Addressing the concept of death, and questioning people's experience of reality, he confronted the viewer with the fragility of human existence, inviting an exploration of the possibilities of transcendence in ***Evanescence***, 1993. Jane Magon described the experience on entering the space as 'immediately sensing an evocation of the sublime, and of a space beyond measure – a presentation of the unpresentable'. In the centre of the room a grid like Japanese temple gate structure was laid out on the floor, and held pure, blue water. The water refers to water-purification rites, a preparation for immortality. The black coal around the pool symbolised the nurturing of humankind and stored energy. The coal, the water and the copper covered ladder were references to energy transferred from one plane to another, while carbon and water referred to the main components of the body. The grid- bath placed at the foot of the copper ladder, reached up to the mysterious black void. The light shining on the up-stretched ladder signified a promise of immortality. Di Mauro could possibly belong to the 'Spiritual Alchemists' for whom the 'quest of the philosopher's stone' becomes a search for spiritual self-knowledge, and hence a 'search for the soul'.

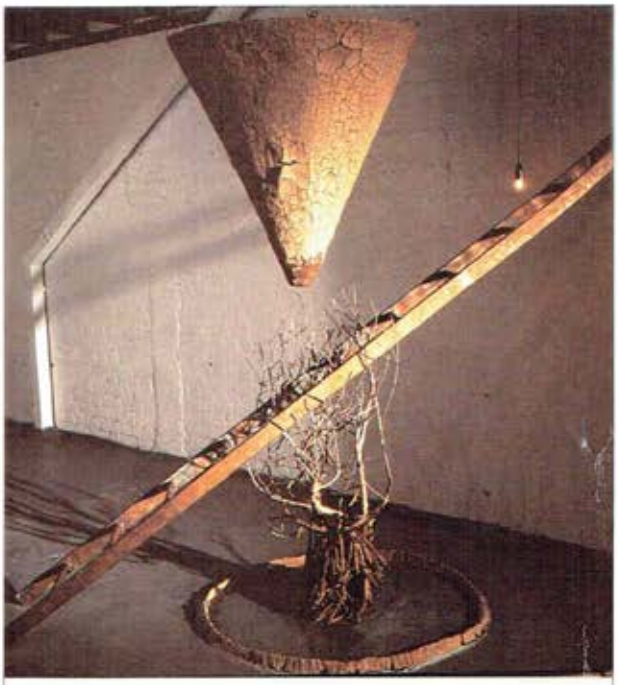
Di Mauro believes the human race has lost touch with it's inner self, and with the natural world in which people live. 'We must all become responsible for the environment in which we live, but first, and foremost reflect to our inner self to recognise the crisis that is now occurring on our earth'. ***Imbalance***, 1992 was developed to create an awareness of an imbalance on the planet. The egg symbolises the cycle of life from birth to death, and was used intentionally to depict

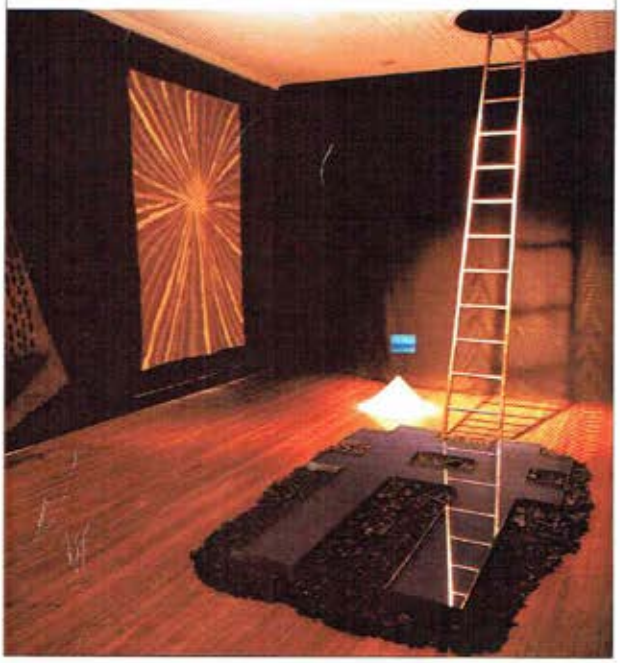


Sebastian Di Mauro, 'Skin', 1996, installation, Carpet underlay, electric blankets, light, pigment, heat. Installation: Ipswich Regional Art Gallery Photograph: Chris Stacy

"Reflect" (detail) Electric blankets, lights, pigment, heat 170 x 856 cm Photograph: Rod Buchholz

"it is no mean feat to extract symbolic significance through a hole in a blanket"





how the human race is becoming a product of it's machines, as well as illustrating the detachment occurring between nature and ourselves, through technology. Felled logs depicted destruction and deforestation occurring worldwide. Four logs were burnt to signify destruction, transformation, purification and regeneration. Di Mauro concludes his artist's statement with a Vivekananda saying – 'if one but thinks a noble, selfless thought even in a cave, it sets up vibrations throughout the world, and does what has to be done', and then he posses the question 'what can be done?'

Since *Evanesence* and *Imbalance*, Di Mauro has refined both the form and the content of his work, while intensifying the overwhelming range of ideological aspirations. In an exhibition entitled ***Diaspora*** 1996, at the now defunct Whitebox Gallery, he showed an aged leather suitcase packed with coarse brown felt in which a cone-shaped hole had been dug. The suitcase an extension on the theme of *Diaspora*, which was based on migration and displacement, pointed towards the notion of art on the run. This type of art thrives in temporary art spaces particularly in Brisbane.

Although the materials may be simpler the viewer is expected to read the same range of possible meanings in the found objects as in Di Mauro's carefully hand made ones. This is the case in his 1996 installation at the Ipswich Regional Art Gallery where he combined old worn out electric blankets with perfectly sculptured forms made from carpet underlay from an earlier exhibition. Di Mauro believes the electric blanket has its own complex symbolism for anyone willing to enter the world of metaphorical meanings. The bed is not only a breeding plane of our species, but the breeding place of all our hopes, fears and fantasies. Both the double bed electric blankets, and the male and female underlay sculptures express the same potential for yin and yang. 'It is no mean feat to extract symbolic significance through a hole in a blanket'.

Di Mauro has been working for more than a decade towards a new soul ecology, and through his simpler use of materials is providing us with more than a moment to contemplate on life's mysteries. Paradoxically, however, Di Mauro stresses the need not to fixate on the inward and private, for care of the soul means going beyond our current notions of individualism. It is integrally connected with community, with relatedness, with pleasure and conviviality. 'We insist on individualism and self-expression', said Di Mauro, 'because we haven't touched deep enough roots of what it is to be an individual, and I suspect that as we get closer to it, we'll discover that it is not as remote from community as we now believe'. ■

Recommended Reading:
Di Mauro, S. 1998, *Between Material*, Sebastian Di Mauro Publisher, Brisbane.

Top left: *'Exaltatio' 1993. Photograph: Andrew Yeo*
Centre: *'Cone', 1996. Photograph: Erik William*
Below: *'Evanescence', 1993. Photograph: Andrew Yeo*