Seeing Di Mauro

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Sebastian Di Mauro is an autobiographical artist. He is the son of migrants and through art tells his story if we care to listen or, more importantly, look. I know, for I too am the son of migrants and recognise a fellow storyteller whose roots are found on the Mediterranean coastline.

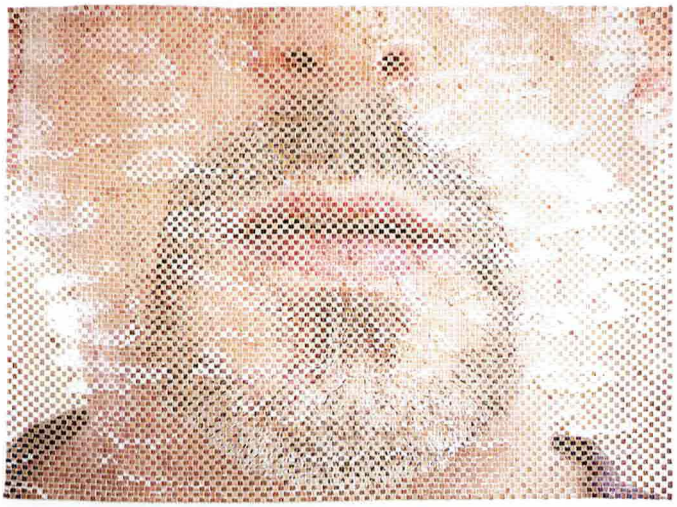
I recently became immersed in the story of Di Mauro's sculptures and installations through his survey exhibition at QUT Art Museum, *a verdurous tale: Sebastian Di Mauro 1987–2009*. There was so much to this exhibition that now, over a year later, I am not sure what I saw or what I know from what is reproduced in the fulsome and lavish catalogue but was not actually in the exhibition. But this does not really matter as I want to say something about the artist as well as the exhibition so well curated by Simone Jones. This encounter with Di Mauro's work was one of those experiences that stay with you for a lifetime: like seeing, for the very first time, the stained glass at Chartres Cathedral, the Giotto frescoes at Assisi or a large Louise Bourgeois spider.

Di Mauro is an artist who comments on life, existence, and what it all means. For him, the journey as well as the arrival is important: the journey is there in the explanations in exhibition captions and in the catalogue, and it becomes a part of the final artworks that take so many different forms and offer so many different challenges.

Di Mauro is a sculptor, an installation artist, a draughtsman, a builder, a conjurer, a magician. He is in search of stories – his stories – and what they mean in the contemporary world. He maintains a unique place in the story of Australian art. Like Robert Klippel, the sculptors' sculptor, Di Mauro will probably find that there is not sufficient time in his life to do all he wants to do, but like Alexander Calder he has realised that size does matter. It is large, generous, tidy; it is fury; it moves and it stands still, it is deep and yet we can comprehend it – at least at some level. It evolves into new elements, and concludes at a point where the eye cannot move from its intensity. Di Mauro's work has gravity, viscosity, some glitz, artificial grass and carpet underlay. Nothing is so ordinary that it cannot find a home in his trove of materials, ideas and places for creating and tantalising.

The tactile is often substituted for the visual. We want to handle and touch Di Mauro's materials but we cannot afford them so much familiarity that we miss their paradox. His works conceal and reveal at the same time; they flaunt and yet can seem timid. Di Mauro shapes and forms but can also cut out with minute detail. He is proud of his past but can be unsure of its impact on the everyday. He is humorous but displays earnestness. And, he escapes to the past but creates very much in the present and for the future.

How can we not be stimulated by his voyage, with titles such as *Suburban Abstractions, Undulant, Blind Spot, Clip, Float* series, *Huddle, Slippage* series and *Shimmer* suite? How can you not fall for

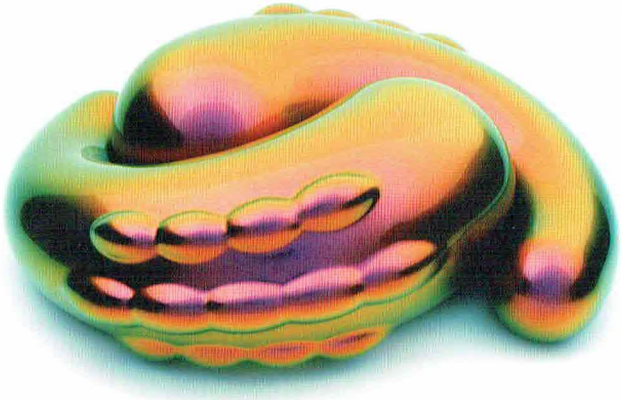


their splendour and grandeur? One can point to a succession of styles in his oeuvre: from figurative to abstract, minimal to the complex, installation to sculptural, fibre to metal and possibly much more. He even employs text and sugar as catalysts. Like Bourgeois, it is not where his motivation comes from but rather how it manages to survive! This can be difficult for Di Mauro because his art is primarily made by hand and, unlike many of his contemporaries, has little to do with the industrial world or popular culture.

It must have been thrilling for him to see so much of his work again, brought together by Jones, in the one place, at the one time, spread out so engagingly. Like those who write about him, Di Mauro sings with one voice but he has it tuned to Marcel Duchamp, Eva Hesse, Bourgeois and even Claes Oldenberg; his 'tessitura' can be traced to Abstract Expressionism, and he is in tone with Ilya Kabakov, Judy Pfaff and Anish Kapoor. Yet he is not a copyist nor merely a follower. His work is original and his forms, shapes and constructs are his alone – unique and singular.

Spatial alignments in the series titled *Manifestations* and *Turf Sweet* are not visual accidents. They are carefully thought-out, planned and manoeuvred. Surfaces too are of the utmost importance, as observed in *Polvere* and *Loll*. It is a private language made up from a variety of sources (but home is an appropriate starting place) and many idiosyncratic components (words and language are congruous). This rationale can be found in *Syncretism* and *Pane e zucchero* where Di Mauro displays some of his key elements. Here in two installations it is evident that he is preoccupied with and even haunted by the problems of memory and loss; he often seeks to memorialise that which has been part of his life. Sugar, salt, oil, with elements funneled into a holy place, and mountains and bibles lit like a church, are all to be found, and assistance is in the titles. Reconciliation, history, language, family and religion are all part of his ambit of inquiry.

As an artist Di Mauro also has concerns which are derived from and can find a home back in the environment – much can be made of Sicily and outback Queensland. But, it is simpler than this; it is about playing with the viewer's perspective and expectation. The outside is brought into the gallery space and in



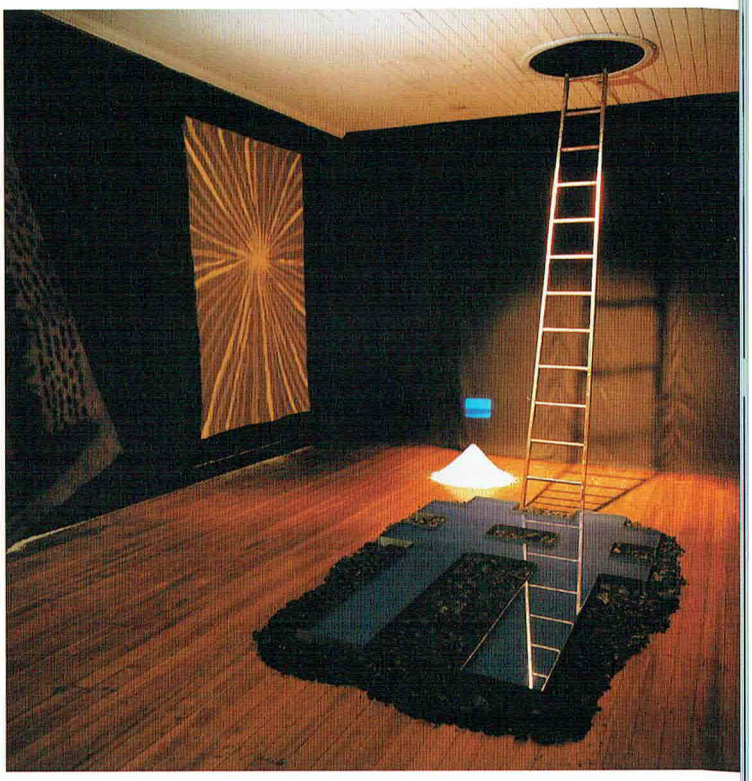
turn the art is posited, at times, in the landscape. Either decision or formula is at ease with its confines: so *Folly* is at one with the surrounding lawns as is *Snuffle* and, in turn, *Undulant* is comfortable in a person-built space, as are the works which make up the *Suburban Abstractions* series. All is appropriate and not out of place; the site and the art do not fight for pride of place. They are at ease with one another.

Much of Di Mauro's work is like a stage set. At QUT Art Museum the viewer could not escape the sense of being roomed out or moving from one theatre to another, ushered by sets and forced by the closeness to the materials from which they are constructed. Take a step in the wrong direction and bump into a wall; move sideways and you are in a new environment, looking at something else. Step back and you lose perspective – too far and the sense of colour and shape change dramatically. Di Mauro was worth the chase, the run and the shuffle in the art gallery. And QUT Art Museum was the right space. It is not one of those venues which crams people in to see the star attraction or the iconic artworks. It is a space where, with ease, one can enjoy and dawdle and look with care, diligently, and wonder.

Di Mauro has created some of the most approachable art in recent years. We have much to absorb and it absorbs us. Even the most cerebral and less tactile is finger food for our imagination. And Di Mauro's art is cerebral. Its dialogue is firstly between the maker and the object, and then between the object and the public that comes to look and look again. There is a peaceful yet provocative experience occurring here; meditative, harmonious, and reflective. As Brancusi remarked: 'Don't look for obscure formulas or mystery in my work. It is pure joy that I offer you. Look at my sculptures until you see them.' Di Mauro might add 'And when you have seen them, look whether you see them as I do.'

footnotes of a verdurous tale: Sebastian di Mauro 1987-2009 is the first survey exhibition of Di Mauro's work. Curated by Simone Jones, it was shown at QUT Art Museum, Brisbane, 31 October 2009 to 31 January 2010. The exhibition coincided with the publication of a major monograph on Di Mauro's work. www.artmuseum.qut.edu.au/ Di Mauro recently showed in *Nature Interrupted: Contemporary Australian Sculpture*, Redland Art Gallery, Cleveland, 13 March to 10 April, 2011. His work *Homeland rule* is part of Bendigo Art Gallery's nationally travelling show *Your move, Australian artists play chess*. Di Mauro will also show in *Australia Felix*, Crane Arts, Philadelphia USA, 3 to 28 August 2011.

Joseph Eisenberg is Cultural Director, Maitland Regional Art Gallery.



P37: *Self portrait*, 2007, woven digital prints on rag paper, 97cm x 131cm; shown in footnotes of a verdurous tale.

P38: (clockwise from top left): 1/ *Neap*, 2007, neoprene, fibreglass and plastic mesh; shown in *footnotes of a verdurous tale*.

2/ *Decoy*, 2006, astroturf, fibre glass and polystyrene; shown in *footnotes of a verdurous tale*.

3/ *Cirrus 1*, 2010, cast aluminium, harlequin paint, 17 x 25 x 25cm. Photograph by Gavin Hansford.

4/ *Homeland rule*, 2010, mixed media, 98 x 300 x 300cm. Photograph by Carl Warner.

5/ *Cirrus 2*, 2010, cast aluminium, harlequin paint, 10 x 30 x 23cm. Photograph by Gavin Hansford.

THIS PAGE: 1/ *Scuta*, 2010, neoprene, fibreglass, polystyrene, various dimensions, installation view Dianne Tanzer Gallery. Photograph by Gavin Hansford.

2/ *Evanescence*, 1993, steel, copper, timber, salt, water, pigment, video, carpet underlay, coal, cloth, air and sound, 360 x 700x 1200cm; shown in *footnotes of a verdurous tale*.

All works by Sebastian di Mauro.
Images courtesy the artist and Dianne Tanzer Gallery, Melbourne.