



SURF'N' TURF

FEBRUARY 8 – MARCH 16 2014

SEBASTIAN DI MAURO



FURL/Ripple Rap 2014
Aluminum, artificial grass, neoprene
380 x 300 x 500 cm

Sebastian Di Mauro 'Surf 'n' Turf'

The beach and the backyard are the quintessential playgrounds of this nation. One is seemingly an 'open to all' democratic space, the other, a private, and usually, intimate one. The shared space of the beach is one where strangers mingle in barely there clothing. Meanwhile, the backyard is the place of retreat and often used as a landscape that is both functional and fecund, where the unruly and expansive natural environment of Australia is corralled into hedges, garden beds, bowers and decorative features.

Brisbane-based artist Sebastian Di Mauro investigates this cultural territory and his personal and family experiences in relation to it in 'Surf 'n' Turf' at the Gold Coast City Gallery. Although comprising a range of individual works produced over the past 10 years, seen together for the first time in this way in the gallery space, the exhibition as presented here can be regarded as an installation. In it, the artist purposefully uses a restricted palette of bright-green, artificial turf and colourful neoprene—the rubbery stuff that wet suits are made of.

The exhibition's starting point is the suburban Australian dream: of owning a house on a large plot of land. It also refers to the fact that a significant percentage of the population live on or close to the coast, and that, despite being drought-prone, there is a strong desire in Australia to create and maintain the evergreen manicured lawn and a 'little piece of heaven on earth'.

Materiality is critical to the meaning of Di Mauro's work. His deliberate use of 'fake' grass plays with the concept of seeking greener pastures—a better life—which most immigrants who venture to Australia, including Di Mauro's own family who immigrated to North Queensland from Sicily in the 1920s, search for. Di Mauro's recollections of his grandfather's lush gardens tendered into rows of strange shaped vegetables, many of them unfamiliar to the restricted Australian palettes of the day, inform these works.

'Surf 'n' Turf' presents a number of sculptural forms made from artificial grass that extend this idea into a more fantastical world of improbable, topiary-like shapes. One wall features Di Mauro's 'Suburban Abstractions', which consists of square grass modules that reference both the visual language of Minimalism and obsessional gardening. His freestanding forms *Sway*, *Surge* and *Nap* populate the gallery floor with strange slightly anthropomorphic shapes.

The concept for the installation also draws from the lawn sprinkler and pool paintings of British-born artist David Hockney. Di Mauro sees parallels in the migration experience of his own grandparents and the way they embraced their new life in tropical Queensland and that of Hockney, who relocated to Los Angeles on the west coast of America in the mid-1960s. Hockney found an extraordinary creative surge in seeing the new lights and landscape there. Di Mauro observes, "Hockney's early work depicts his experience of living on

the west coast. Many of these paintings depict green manicured lawns, blue water pools and a new way of living to the one he left behind in England.”

Di Mauro’s reflections on Hockney’s experience, translated into the context of Gold Coast, are an exciting new extension of his practice. In everything from motels, signs, entertainment and outdoor lifestyle, Californian culture has shaped the development of the Gold Coast.

This link relates to Di Mauro’s long-term interest in commenting on human interaction with nature and the way we seek to control and nurture it. While the beaches, waterways and sub-tropical plantings of this city appear ‘natural’, in fact, much of the Gold Coast landscape is completely artificial: the beaches are shaped by groynes and deep-water bars, the canal estates are perfectly shaped to maximise water-frontage, and the palms and lush grass are all introduced, requiring extensive watering to maintain.

With a series of neoprene wall sculptures reminiscent of both surf boards and tribal shields, Di Mauro seems to be referencing the real turf wars that take place on the Gold Coast when the surf is up, with hundreds of board riders jostling for position on the popular breaks.

The central striking installation in ‘Surf ‘n’ Turf’ is *FURL/Ripple Rap*, shown here for the first time, which features a large, undulating artificial turf form that extends from the wall and wraps outwards onto the floor. Drawing from Di Mauro’s extensive experience in public art practice, the work nestles just below the ceiling and falls to the floor, creating an unexpected and illusory experience within the gallery space. Patches of blue neoprene sit within the turf, and these perfectly clean, pool-like shapes, representing the aquatic pride of the backyard, epitomise our desire to reconstruct and control a natural experience with our domestic space.

Virginia Rigney
Senior Curator, Gold Coast City Gallery

Sebastian Di Mauro is a Senior Lecturer in Fine Art at the Queensland College of Art, Griffith University, where he teaches sculpture. He has held over 45 solo exhibitions and his work has been included in more than 100 group exhibitions in Australia and overseas. His paintings, sculptures, artist books and installations are collected by many of Australia’s key art institutions. He has received numerous awards, prizes, grants and residencies. During the last 10 years, Di Mauro has completed major public art commissions in high profile buildings in Adelaide, Brisbane, Logan, Ningbo, Hong Kong and Shanghai. His work is celebrated in two monographs, *Between Material* (1998) and *Footnotes of a Verdurous Tale* (2009). He is represented by CREATIVEMOVE.

Surf 'n' Turf

"Surf 'n' Turf" may conjure memories of a retro pub meal at some coastal location. Was it an exclusively Queensland idea to unite seafood and red meat on a single plate, usually in quantities sufficient to feed a family? For this exhibition at the Gold Coast, under the 'Surf 'n' Turf' banner, Sebastian Di Mauro has created a major new installation and brought together sculpture from the last 10 years that speak directly to the coast's reputation for sun and surf, its long-term attraction as a recreational centre, and its kitsch vernacular. As an artist, Di Mauro has often embraced the double edge of nostalgia—its joyous and, at times, excruciating elements. This work revels in the aspirations of the suburban Australian dream, the desire—particularly in immigrant populations—to recreate the green grass and garden that signifies a home.

The exhibition brings together two bodies of work from Di Mauro's oeuvre—sculptures in AstroTurf, with their green grass associations, and others in blue wetsuit material neoprene with its links to the ocean and recreation. Together, they celebrate the cultural mish mash that is Australia. Born to immigrant parents, Di Mauro is well aware of the search for a better life by those (such as his Sicilian grandparents) who arrived to a brown and barren land, often with a suitcase or less. Di Mauro says of his grandparents, "They had to recreate themselves, and they vested their memories of their past in the land they came to. And they worked hard to achieve." His work alludes to the plastic grass and green concrete associated with earlier Italian immigrants to Australia, with love and understanding, and is celebratory of their meaning over generations.

Di Mauro notes, "Australia is so often in drought that the desire for manicured grass really spoke to the illusion of the past, but it is also a search for utopia. It is also part of suburban Australia, the need to create our own green territory." This work also cites the formal gardens of Europe, and the controlled way in which we seek (and often fail) to deal with nature.

In the exhibition, Di Mauro has combined AstroTurf and neoprene for the first time in an installation titled *FURL/Ripple Rap*, which includes the word 'terroni' a slang term in northern Italy for someone from southern Italy. He says, "It is a derogatory term that means someone who is lazy, and doesn't work at all". This curvaceous form unfurls across the ceiling, over the walls and on the floor. Green grass is interspersed with two ponds of blue—a marriage of the yearning for lush pasture with the seductive nature of the Australian ocean, the kidney shape of the typical swimming pool, and all the associated connections with rest and relaxation.

In contrast, Di Mauro's neoprene series of multi-coloured wall sculptures are shaped like shields, a reference to surfboards and the tribal shields of

Australia's indigenous peoples. Titled for Roman emperors, with geometric abstract markings, they relate to Di Mauro's own antecedents and combine the complex layers that characterise modern Australia.

He began working with neoprene when completing a public sculpture commission for the Brisbane Magistrates Court. He states, "I wanted to make work that might alleviate stress and was thinking about stress balls and how they were constructed. The concept consisted of a blue neoprene horizon line embedded in the wall—and the more organic neoprene blue works have a fluid element, as though the flotsam and jetsam of the ocean finds form in the object. I like the association with the coast, a place to relax and tune into the rhythm of the ocean."

Di Mauro spent his teenage years frequenting the Mini Golf courses on the coastal strip, and in the 'turf wars' that marked the waves at the surf beaches. 'Surf 'n' Turf' represents his own and a universal Australian experience, created in robust materials, with lively word play. This exhibition is playful and joyful in its form, function and folly.

Loiuse Martin-Chew

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Front:

pro Cocceus Nevra from the 'Scuta' series 2009

Fibreglass, neoprene, plastic mesh

110 x 43 x 25 cm

Left:

pro Marcus Aurelius from the 'Scuta' series 2009

Fibreglass, neoprene, plastic mesh

93 x 56 x 25 cm

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ISBN: 978-0-9871415-4-5