

The Hills Are Alive With Visual Art

Professional artists are highly individual people. But when they come together, form a collective, and hold group exhibitions, their combined strength and mutual support make for delightful surprises that celebrate the singular and collective wonder of making art. Such is the case with The Artists' Voice group from the Adelaide Hills, South Australia.

By Christine Nicholls

With few exceptions, the artworks in *The Artists' Voice Christmas Show* speaks to a world of artistic appreciation, control, order, and a high level of knowledge and awareness of Western art history. A number of works in the exhibition reflect acute environmental responsiveness and a willingness to engage with serious artistic, secular, and religious themes—the big questions that frame our human existence.

The works of this cosmopolitan, multicultural group of professional artists, the majority of whom are Adelaide Hills-dwellers,¹ are currently on display in the small but historically significant satellite town of Hahndorf.² Exhibiting art in Hahndorf's only public gallery also means showcasing local talent to the large contingents of Australian and overseas tourists who make the pilgrimage to this crucible of Australian migrant history.

The Artists' Voice group, formed in 1997, comprises around 30 members spanning an age range of circa four decades, with the oldest (and exceptionally active) affiliate in his mid-late 80s. On several occasions each year, the group exhibits its work at the Hahndorf Academy, first named in 1857 by the pioneering German Lutheran Traugott Wilhelm Boehm, who, in 1839, at the age of three, landed in the newly settled colony of South Australia,

having come by boat ('The Zebra'). The en masse migration of German Lutheran settlers to South Australia from that time onwards was due to religious persecution in their Prussian homeland.

Over the years, the Academy (like Hahndorf itself, the name of which was

changed by government edict in 1917 to 'Ambleside' owing to anti-German sentiment during WW1, though later reinstated under the South Australian Nomenclature Act of 1935) has undergone several name changes reflecting the building's changing functions. The Hahndorf Academy's 'German Connection' lives on to this day.

Monika Morgenstern, for example, a hard-working, very capable Prussian-born photographer, is the current chairperson/president of this professional artists' association, having held this key position for some years.

Morgenstern's digital work, *Lucy State 2*, addresses, in the artist's words, "... the ambiguous realm of the spiritual world" providing the viewer with an "intimate look at a very private experience." The focus of this rich, consciously composed work is on representing the artist's internal world. In *Lucy State 2*, Morgenstern portrays a human head and bust suffused with numinous light, literally glowing with subtle energies. The artist conveys this translucent imagery by means of the visual metaphors of reduplication, transparency, and inner luminescence, alluding, perhaps, to an experience of intense spiritual enlightenment.

In his accomplished photographic work, Adam Dutkiewicz reveals himself as a master of what is perhaps the illusory quiescence of the Australian bush landscape. His



Monika Morgenstern, *Lucy State 2*, 2014, digital image mounted on aluminum 90 x 60 cm. Image: Courtesy of the Artist.

C-type photograph, *Mt. Lofty*, is another work that exerts a subtle spell, in this case conveyed by the artist's expert use of dark and light and mysterious shadow play. It is a work of true perfectionism. While Dutkiewicz is a man of old world, calm and courteous demeanor, this captivating work leads one to surmise that possibly lurking inside such a mild exterior there resides a sneaky sensualist.

About this work, and of his *oeuvre* generally, Dutkiewicz has this to say: "Most of my photographic work at present is landscape based I spend at least one day each weekend, usually, hiking in conservation parks with others, looking for subject matter. I travel light, carrying two lenses, one of which enables me to use some capacity of zoom to shoot animals and insects at a distance or to get details that aren't easily accessible.

"My primary interest, though, is to observe carefully and try to find unusual subjects that I think will work as images for my art photography It's probably true to say that I am especially intrigued by texture and shadow and light-play. I also want to portray the quintessential characteristics and details of our local bush environments.

"In *Mt Lofty - 40895*, I used the



Adam Dutkiewicz, Mount Lofty - 40895, 2014, type C photograph, 74 x 50 cm. Image: Courtesy of the Artist.

dappled light cast on the surface of two adjacent gums as background for a skeletal twig and its shadow play. The image was mysterious to me, as the sun was overhead, although it had been a wet morning in mid-winter. The bark was damp and was reflecting the color of the sky behind me, even though there was

white cloud on the eastern horizon. The scene offered some kind of visual conundrum, in terms of what was foreground and what was mid-ground, and how the two tree 'canvases' were actually situated in the space.

"In more cases than not, I take care to accentuate the aspects of the exposure I like in processing. Here, I was attracted to the palette and tones in the shadows, and wanted to emphasize the colors in the image as I might prefer to paint them in an abstract picture."

Flanking *Mt Lofty* on one side, and in conversation with it, is the work of a relatively new member of the group, Audrey Kooyman. Kooyman's moody, evocative oil diptych *Night Falling over the Range* is well executed and poetic, evincing a strong command of the traditional vocabularies of Western painting. Beside Kooyman's work and also in colloquy

with nearby works is Alison Brown's *The Duke*, a beautifully constructed, marvelously textured, mixed-media work of variegated cognate colors, and comprised of wood, acrylic paint, and collage, fluted along its horizontal axis. *The Duke* gazes across the gallery space toward Brown's second work: her splendid *Lake Eyre* is a



Audrey Kooyman, Night Falling over the Ranges, 2014, oil on canvas diptych, 91 x 60 cm each. Image: Courtesy of Michal Klivanek.



Alison Brown, Dispersal - Lake Eyre, 2014, acrylic on canvas, 61 x 76 cm. Image: Courtesy of Michal Klivanek.

study in sensuous blue and white, in which sentient, fleecy clouds seem to be floated directly out of a heavenly body.

Facing—more or less—the Dutkiewicz work, Ross Hill's *Study for Harbingers*, a semi-abstract work deploying the science of contrasts, announces its indirect kinship with this thematic grouping of works. At this point, it needs to be said that the exhibition's curators, who also hung the exhibition (Kit Neave, Alison Brown, Donna Brink-Reid, Kon Heyer and Donald Richardson) deserve high praise for their thoughtful curation of these artworks in this rather challenging space.

Adjacent to the works by Dutkiewicz *et al*, viewers' eyes are immediately drawn to Kon Heyer's *Communion*, a mixed-media work. This apparently cryptically named work is characterized by a blast of color, *joie de vivre*, and intense fervor of spirit. Originally an upturned plastic garden table, this work affirms Heyer's long-term fascination with the transformation of three-dimensional circular readymades into objets d'art. In terms of the artist's out-there color use in *Communion*: Kandinsky on steroids, perhaps?

Upon reflection, *Communion* is aptly named, especially in terms of the word's connotations and the punning title. The common garden meaning of 'commu-



Ross Hill, *Study for Harbingers*, 2014, acrylic on arches paper, 80 x 50 cm. Image: Courtesy of Michal Klivanek.

nion' relates to the intimacy of relationships of people who break bread together and commune around a table (the Latin root of which, *communio*, means something along the lines of 'participating', or 'group sharing', reflected in the English

word 'community'—also a key word with respect to this Artists' Voice group). Of course, the word communion has deeper resonance in terms of Christian religion and belief, which is also relevant in this context.

Aside from such considerations, Heyer's *Communion* table is a very fetching *thing*. It talks back to the other readymade, spare-part "things" created by Donald Richardson, encased inside a Perspex case and perched on a nearby plinth. Donald Richardson's "things" are Duchampian-influenced (Richardson is on record as saying, "Duchamp is my god") sculptural mixed-media works, titled *Hat and Garter*, *Cord*, and *Feather*. Like Heyer's work, Richardson's "things" have been created from various recycled plastics, including what appears to be the lid of a yoghurt container, a well-known Australian brand of inhaler (Ventolin), and other assorted remnants that have long ceased to be functional, but instead have been re-purposed as artworks. As with René Magritte's famous maxim "*Ceci n'est pas une pipe*", "*Ceci n'est pas un inhalateur pour les asthmatiques*" ("This is not an asthma inhaler!").

One is reminded here of Heidegger's essay *Origin of the Work of Art* (*Der Ursprung des Kunstwerkes*), in which he discusses what he describes as the "thingness of things." Jacques Derrida engaged with Heidegger's idea in a volume titled *The Truth in Painting*,



Kon Heyer, *Communion*, 2014, mixed media wall sculpture, 95 cm diameter. Image: Courtesy of Michal Klivanek.



Kym Afford, *Untitled*, 2014, plaster and acrylic sculpture, 54 x 40 cm. Image: Courtesy of Michal Klivanek.

in which he wrote: "... The mere thing is a sort of equipment, albeit equipment denuded of its equipmental being. Thing-being consists in what is then left over. But this remnant is not actually defined in its ontological character ..." (Derrida, 1987: 28).

Helix, another very fetching sculptural 'thing' remodeled from iron scrap by Donald Richardson, who has described himself as an "unreconstructed Cubist", is situated toward the other end of the gallery space. Behind Richardson's three-work installation is Kym Afford's sculpture, *Untitled*, which could be described as being "out there," defined in the Australian Dictionary of Slang as, among other things, "actively participating" [in something]. The hand cupping the breast in a proprietary but awkward manner is definitely "actively participating" in something—perhaps a quick boob-grab in a quiet backroom in the course of a raucous Aussie barbecue, where, after too many beers, such an occasion could well arise. Seen in such a light, Afford has superbly managed his work for maximum drama and visual shock.

In stark contrast, Kit Neave's beautifully rendered *St. Catherine* and her *Madonna and Child*, egg tempera works depicting Orthodox icons, appear to have been created to beguile the unconverted; Neave's Cubist-influenced work *Transform* indicates that this artist commands



Above from left: Donald Richardson, *Cord*, 2014, mixed-media sculpture, 36 x 9 x 9 cm; Donald Richardson, *Feather*, 2014, mixed-media sculpture, 30 x 13 x 9 cm; and Donald Richardson, *Hat and Garter*, 2014, mixed-media sculpture, 36 x 9 x 9 cm. Image: Courtesy of Michal Klivanek.

considerable range and complexity.

Adjacent to, and in artistic dialogue with Neave's Orthodox-inspired works, is Penny Choate's *Australian Icon*, combining the Eureka Flag, which doubles as a Christian cross, and an embedded prayer cloth, also closely associated with Christian religious belief. According to the artist, *Australian Icon* is: "... a study for a larger painting which would have been an oil on canvas. The prayer cloth is St. Veronica's handkerchief,

which has been painted by a number of artists including Zurbarán (1598–1664). The medium is colored pencil."

In terms of artistic fusion and, to coin a neologism, the vernacularization of a number of differing concepts, *Australian Icon* is a truly compelling work. As one work in Choate's continuing series named *Ironic Icons*, it is devoutly to be hoped that the artist will go on and develop her *Australian Icon* into a grander-scale oil painting.



Penny Choate, *Australian Icon*, 2014, pencil and mixed media on paper, 28x20 cm. Image: Courtesy of Michal Klivanek.



Lauryn Arnott, *Commemorating the Unknown Pioneer Bride I and II*, 2014, drawing/collage/mixed media on paper, 150 x 61 cm each. Image: Courtesy of Michal Klivanek.

Ironic *Australian Icon* it is, too, at another level, in that the Eureka Flag has been co-opted by a number of Australian groups with diverse political views and agendas (sometimes contradictory, ranging from extreme left to extreme right-wing anti-establishment). Penny Choate's stance also extends to what appears to be ambivalence about Christianity itself.

On entering the exhibition space, on the back-facing wall, visitors are greeted by Lauryn Arnott's marvelous mixed-media work, *Commemorating the Unknown Pioneer Bride I & II*. Arnott's accomplished work is a form of homage to the German migrant women and girls who arrived in South Australia, chiefly between 1838 and 1888, to begin new lives. Many came from Silesia, while others hailed from Brandenburg, Posen, and further afield.

In this work Arnott, herself a comparatively recent migrant (from Zimbabwe), references the traditional German custom of women wearing black wedding gowns with lace flounces, creatively rendered in this work as cut-out doyleys, and black, lace-up boots (although the latter are not visible in these works). These young immigrant women, often married to older men, severe in character and demeanor, would work like navvies on the family farm. These



Kit Neave, Transform, 2014, oil on canvas, 66 x 66 cm. Image: Courtesy of Michal Klivanek.

young women routinely foot-walked, on a weekly basis, down to Adelaide, taking their farm produce to sell at market, then walk back uphill—a distance of more than 50 kilometers altogether, which involved crossing flooded streams, descending and ascending mountainous country. It was a difficult life and these young women had few rights. Strength of character (and of body) was *de rigueur*. This is reflected in the title of these works, *Commemorating the Unknown Pioneer Bride I & II*, which is an excellent riff on the ubiquitous commemorations of male valor (which are of course valid) and strength of body and character, but it is a comparatively rare



Peter McLachlan, Cosmos, 2005, oil on canvas, 80 x 100 cm. Image: Courtesy of Michal Klivanek.

occurrence to commemorate these qualities in anonymous young women.

As Arnott explains: "... Whilst drawing the antique Black Wedding Dress in the Museum, I considered what Hahndorf was like 175 years ago, and the life of the unknown bride, who wore this dress. I saw the dress to be like an open chrysalis, an empty shell from which a woman has slipped away like the identity of the unknown bride."

Next to Arnott's work is Julie Morris's intriguing, intricate, and meticulously wrought drawing *Labyrinth*, which she has created with graphite on white paper. In this drawing, the subject matter of which appears to be a sea sponge, the artist's skill and her precise awareness of the sponge's component parts

and its absorbing particularities reveal genuine talent that needs to be nurtured.

Likewise, Margie Hooper's wittily-described *Apartments: Future Tense, ABC*, an oil on canvas triptych, also exhibited earlier in 2014 as part of her solo exhibition *Sea Change*, is testament to the artist's enthrallment with marine-based artistic subject matter.

Peter McLachlan's superb *Cosmos*, enshrining perhaps a rather dystopic vision of the riotous grandeur of our universe in visual form—for me—evoked the poetry of Gerald Manly Hopkins, a Jesuit priest and poet, whose poetry, in which he used "sprung rhythm", seemed to encapsulate the world in which we live, but also its strange beauty. The opening lines of Hopkins's *God's Grandeur* (1877):

"... The world is charged with the grandeur of God.
It will flame out, like shining from shook foil;
It gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil
Crushed. Why do men then now not
reck his rod? ..."

It is the compressed nature of the conflicted passion in Hopkins' verse that imbues it with such potency. A similar feeling of visual and emotional compression is evident in McLachlan's *Cosmos*, permeating his work with a powerful charge.

Next to McLachlan's work are several accomplished three-dimensional works by Donna Brink Reid, a gifted artist whose 'inner Cubist' seems not only to live on, but to be thriving. Brink Reid's *Circles and Sectors, Rudolph*, and



Julie Morris, **Labyrinth**, 2014, graphite on paper, 50 x 60 cm. Image: Courtesy of Michal Klivanek.



Margie Hooper, **Apartments: Future tense**, 2014, oil on canvas triptych, 60 x 90 cm. Image: Courtesy of Michal Klivanek.

her other wood pattern cubist-influenced work show Léger and Braque to be significant influences. Her quasi-figurative sculpture *Akimbo*, which seems to be sprouting multiple little body parts, snags viewers' attention equally effortlessly.

Michael Bryant's mixed-media work *Mapping Memory* possesses dream-like ambience, bringing together memories that seemingly coalesce polar opposites. Betty Anderson's humorously titled oil painting, *Eggcentric*, is skillfully rendered; likewise, her lovely *Still Life*. Norma Mansell's fine, quasi-expressionistic piece *Whoosh* and in particular her *Ground Hog*, in which she has used acrylic inks, are elegant compositions.

Nita Clifton is the industrious, conscientious secretary of The Artists' Voice, whose portraiture of Australian birds (the kookaburra, the cocky, and the magpie) titled *Sing, Squawk, and Laugh* particularly delighted overseas visitors to the exhibition. Anni Luur Fox's delicately rendered *Flight to Coober Pedy* acrylic on canvas and her *Andamooka Airstrip*, both marked by economy of style, seamlessly reflect this distinctive, dry, dusty South Australian terrain.

Suzi Fagan's lovingly assembled ceramic stoneware works have been infused not only with seemingly secret, private messages, but also with the Japanese *wabi-sabi* principle. Titled with ironic little homilies, such as *Don't Step in the Same River Twice*, the name of one of her finely made bowls, they appear to be imbued with very personal meanings.

Finally, Rita Hall's wry monotype prints make a significant

contribution to this exhibition. Hall's sheer technical facility with the tricky medium of monotype printing is evident in the subtlety of these artworks. Equally in evidence is Hall's razor-sharp satirical sense.

Indeed, the ironic written commentaries on each work serve to destabilize viewers' expectations. In particular, the inclusion of a sardonic, written question that accompanies the double image of Hall's *Person in Hat*: "So you do that for a living or is it just a hobby?" renders it impossible to anchor the meaning of Hall's visual imagery to the textual mean-

ing. Hall's written annotation is interpretable only as eternally open-ended. That very question is often directed at professional artists on learning of their *métier*, and not always kindly.

Or, maybe, Hall's subject is a cross-dresser, given the rather severely masculine haircut and rock-hewn facial structure? There could well be myriad other reasons to explain this intriguing, editorializing textual element: it's a delightfully preposterous proposition.

To conclude, the diverse, myriad-faceted artworks in *The Artist's Voice* collectively testify to the marvelous *esprit de corps* that exists among this gifted group of South Australian artists. May the Adelaide Hills remain alive with the image-voices of these artists for a very long time. Δ



Rita Hall, **Do you do that for a living?**, 2013, monotype print, 65 x 43 cm. Image: Courtesy of Michal Klivanek.

Notes:

1. 'The Hills' is the affectionate name by which the area is locally known.
2. Hahndorf Academy, Hahndorf, South Australia, from December 5, 2014 to January 18, 2015.

References:

1. Derrida, Jacques, 1987, *The Truth in Painting*, University of Chicago Press, London and Chicago.
2. Hopkins, Gerard Manley, 1918, *Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, edited with notes by Robert Bridges, Humphrey Milford, London.

Dr. Christine Nicholls is an Australian contributing editor for Asian Art News and World Sculpture News. She lives in Adelaide, South Australia.