

THE MATTER SPEAKS

Have you ever experienced the threatening power of the blank page? You have settled yourself down at your desk or easel and there in front of you is a space of near white fullness. It greets you with all its uncertain futures. There's a momentary terror, a loss of libido. You want to make a start, but there before you is an expanse of pre-emptory guilt. What if your first mark besmirches its virginal beauty? What if its ink sinks into the fibres of its being, a stain, a smear, ever present and perceptible, a sign of your lack?

There is a moment's hesitation.

Then.....

In the first room we tried, the slide projector failed to work. Momentarily, it was as though we had been thrown back in time to the days when we had worked together as tutors in Visual Culture. Technical hitches were always the bane of our working lives. We followed the time-honoured routine, checking the leads, the power points, but finally, we decided the bulb had blown. There was no other option, we moved to a smaller tutorial room, this time with technological success. I settled myself on the uncomfortable plastic chair, yet another reminder of our livelihood within art educational institutions. I took a blank page, folded it in half and perched it on my diary in preparation for note taking. Marie turned off the lights.

"Some of my slides are not so good," she said, "but at least you'll get a sense of what I have done."

Have you ever been caught in the thrall of the first mark? You have overcome the authority of the void and cast a gleaming shimmer of colour across its surface. Your mark glides with glee, a carefree gesture of presence. The lips of your stroke slowly infuse the sheet with luscious vibrancy. The colour coalesces. You delight in the consummate realisation of painting, the joyous pain of creation. Here before you is your *raison d'être*.

There's a moment's hesitation.

Then.....

So what did I see in that darkened room with its flickering screen of retrospective images? How do I make sense of twenty years of a colleague's practice? What tales do I tell that speak of the intensity of passion, of the quest for visual sensibility, of the vitality of mark making that has coloured Marie's engagement in the realm of painting? How do I relate a story of enthusiasm and dedication? What words do I use to convey Marie's rigorous work ethic, her discipline and strength of purpose?

Have you ever arrived at that point of momentous decision? You have worked on the painted territory for several hours. You've considered mark upon mark. You've added, erased, had fragments of triumphal insight and nodes of potential disaster. There, before you, evidence of your hand, your eye, sits patiently awaiting closure. Should you leave it there or would a slight adjustment in the right hand corner tip the balance?

There's a moment's hesitation.

Then.....

There, as the slides juxtaposed image with idea, I listened to the ardour in Marie's voice as she reconstructed her history. She spoke of changes and influences; how her initial art education in Europe had coincided with conceptual art. When studying in Germany, the focus had been on drawing and the perfecting of technical skills. With her move to Australia, her teacher, John Beard, had instilled in her the concept of a painter without limits. She related her desire to question, to deconstruct and reinterpret the authority of American Abstract Expressionism that seemed to pervade the local art scene. Scale was everything. The abundances of the 1980s allowed her freedom to push ideas without concerns about excess or a waste of paint. She considered how, as a woman artist, her engagement with the painted surface was in marked contrast to that of her male peers. While they were determined and focused on singular considerations, Marie wanted everything, in every direction. She was interested in pursuing art without the necessity of closure. Her practice was an endless exploration of potential meaning. One canvas could easily be twenty. She told about her impatience; how she would battle with colour, shapes and words. Words became both a key and a hindrance. When her drawing wasn't quick enough she'd scribble words. The text was irrelevant. It was a visual device used to extend the potentialities of meaning.

She proposed this was, in some sense, a reaction to her struggle with English, her discomfort and displacement associated with living in Perth. Although she may have battled with words, seeking their erasure or uncovering their ambiguity, she made sense of her experience through the painted surface. The span of canvas, the interplay of colours and shapes render visible evidence of her spatial sensibilities.

While Marie's history may be easily rendered in the standard biography usually found in exhibition catalogues, what is not evident from the dates, the lists of shows, publications and commissions is the daily practice of attending to visualising encounters with the world. A retrospective provides the audience with a visual record of an artist's achievements, her engagement with the fundamentals of seeing and a context for appreciating her works in a broader history of practice. For the artist, a retrospective offers the chance to recollect the mechanics of her production, to signpost forgotten avenues of exploration and indicate future directions. It is a moment of both recollection and reconstruction.

Have you ever been frustrated by the injustice of words? You want to speak of your experience. You plough through the recalcitrant dictionary to find only small words with their small meanings. The mean vocabulary denies the profundity of your knowing. It curbs the subtle nuances of your every breath. Angered by its ineptitude, you turn to the tract of canvas spread out before you. You take the brush dripping with livid evidence. You cast your mark out onto the stretch of creative enunciation.

There is no hesitation.
Jouissance.

The matter speaks.

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