

Queering reason's pitch

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SURREALISM, n. Psychic automatism in its pure state by which one proposes to express the actual functioning of thought. Dictated by thought, in the absence of any control exercised by reason; exempt from any aesthetic or moral concern (André Breton, *First Manifesto of Surrealism*, Paris 1924).

For all Breton's dogmatic confidence, though, the attempt to express "the actual functioning of thought" in works of art seldom went beyond the representation of ideas concerning the manner in which sex allegedly permeates our every thought. And the conspicuous destabilisation of appearances, or the symbolic insurrection of Surrealist artists in the 'twenties and 'thirties, failed equally to reveal the vision of the poet as seer, or the magic of the pre-logical mind. A cause of Surrealism's abrupt decline as a movement of ideas lies in the theoretical naivety which had Breton believe in the spontaneous power of "the artist" to suspend "the control of reason" and to work without "any aesthetic or moral concern". The poetic licence envisaged by Breton betrays a somewhat narcissistic belief in the individual's freedom to realise himself outside society, while all serious artists would know – by experience – that the directness Surrealism strives for in the expression of an all-encompassing Desire is never a given, but a distant goal, and

the product of sustained artistic effort. In effect, the most successful visual *oeuvres* to emerge from the Surrealist atmosphere have been precisely the least literary: those paintings tending to discard the power of the poetic image and the facility of the subverted cliché. For example, it was by rejecting the evidence of metaphoric semblances that Miro's work – or, later, Arshile Gorky's – tacitly abandoned the Surrealist programme and revealed the essential *unrepresentability* of the unconscious.

These – far too summarily, to be sure – are some of the reasons why the dedication of James Gleeson's *oeuvre* to the spirit of Surrealism cannot be understood as a continuation of the Parisian movement. For that movement, even in the late 'thirties when Gleeson began to exhibit, was already as dead as the belief in the emancipating power of art on the collective mind of the masses, or the belief, nowadays, in the disinterested benevolence of computer technology.

James Gleeson, I think, never really belonged to the Surrealist movement. He utilised, rather, a genre seen by him as hospitable to his preoccupation with sexuality and its place in the then puritanical society of his country. This adoption of Surrealism coincided with the psychoanalytical foundation of the French current of thought and its presumption of innocence *vis à vis* what used to be thought of as deviant sexual practices. The problem was, and it still is, that the iconoclasm of the artist was too strictly grounded in a private preoccupation to be genuinely critical of dominant visual conventions. The homosexual referent defining his iconography as a whole goes hand in hand with a deeply conservative vision that often causes the work to capsize into mannerism. The artist remains alone with the objects of his contemplation; there is no interaction, no empathy, no response to the phenomenal world outside, merely a frozen stare that turns everything into stone or the hypothetical fantasy of a solipsistic vision.

In the show *Signals from the Perimeter*, (Text-Collage-Drawings from the Agapitos/Wilson, O'Keefe & Art Gallery of New South Wales collections) at the Ivan Dougherty Gallery throughout July, several themes could be seen to combine in Gleeson's graphic art: technology, classical Greek art, the animal world, the body of insects, European literature, male anatomy and of course the Phallus around which virtually everything revolves here. More fundamentally, the constant juxtaposition of the registers of nature and culture underlines both the arbitrariness of cultural conventions and the inhumanity of nature. And in these constructed images, the body of man is either flayed (no longer human) or on the

contrary, tattooed, written over by culture, that is literally "denatured". Technology also participates in this description of human life as "beyond good and evil", for the body represented in these works on paper shows no signs of autonomous will. It is simply the site of different processes that all exceed its power of response. Lost in a vortex of causes and effects, the entity conjured in Gleeson's microcosm appears to have next to no power over its own fate. It is governed by heteronomous forces and one is left with the impression that the true subject of this *oeuvre* is nothing other than a brute, cosmic and – of course – unconscious "energy".

This amorality of Gleeson's vision is, however, not of the unthinking kind. On the contrary, it is steeped in a classical Apollonian sensibility and the very large body of literary references that can be read on the images. A whole pantheon of Modernist writers or Modernist precursors is called on to supplement the images with their most famous words but, in so doing, they underline the contradiction at the heart in the work. Even though the artist endeavours to present his viewer with a liberating vision and to show – beyond tired habits of seeing – the naked reality of psychic life, the world he depicts is self-enclosed and admits very little that could disrupt its sheltered nihilism. In this cosy hell, where social reality dissolves into so many cultural signs and literary themes, the artist can pursue his investigations of the fragility of mental constructs and death's proximity to all things human. He has mastered a historical style of representation, and within the now-conventional aesthetic of collage produces these sometimes startling illustrations of our moral alienation and intellectual impassivity. But no matter how fine, their distance from everyday life makes his images as unlikely to shed new light as they are to plunge us into new obscurities.

IN A VERY DIFFERENT vein, the works of John Bartley continue to fulfill their early aesthetic promise. But as in previous exhibitions, the painter seems more at ease with small works than with large canvases. And if Robert Hughes is right to argue that every artist must find his scale – the size of gesture proper to the image and medium he uses – it seems clear to me that John Bartley ought to reconcile himself to the fact that his work will not gain from being seen from a distance. The intimate nature of his semi-abstract imagery explains his greater success with works whose size and scale reflects a spontaneous preference for discretion – even secrecy. The richness of texture and the tactile sensuousness of the images evokes the deliberate myopia of lovers, the twilight that ought to protect amorous gestures from a crudely investigative gaze. Exploring the nexus between *ars pigendi* and *ars erotica*, John Bartley's art takes its place in a most ancient tradition, and it