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Moët & Chandon Australian Art Foundation  
Celebration of a Decade and 1997 Touring Exhibition

IN BETWEEN AND BEYOND:  
IRONY AND ART OF THE  
PRESENT  
1997 MOËT & CHANDON  
TOURING EXHIBITION  
Anna Clabburn

Viewing the Moët & Chandon Touring Exhibition is always a little like listening to a number of different conversations all at once. Sometimes, however, it is possible to discern pockets of clarity amid the conceptual chaos of individual ideas. The 1997 selection offers one of these rare instances, where a cohesive theme can at least be suggested. Although identifying a theme involves the generalisation of each artist's work, it can also illuminate moments of *simpatico* in current art practice. While it would be presumptuous to consider the following analysis as a concrete survey of contemporary Australian art's *zeitgeist*, it seems apt to approach this exhibition via a dominant idea.

Almost every work selected for this award utilises irony as a strategic form. Most often, this trait is manifest in the art object's curious self-consciousness or self-critique. Many works exhibit an introversion, suggesting the artist's desire to comment on art's objecthood. This acute inward gaze operates as a disclaimer; as if to protect the object itself from theoretical dissection or dismissal. On a more profound level, it also signals the artist's awareness of the legacy of Dada and the 20th century belief in art's ambiguous relationship with reality and rational thought. By cultivating irony, or mixed meaning, the artists inoculate their work against final judgment: admitting contradiction provides them with a means of avoiding the vulnerability of a clear statement. For most, irony is a natural and expected reflex, sparked by an ongoing uncertainty about art's social role in our community.<sup>1</sup> As this exhibition demonstrates, today's practitioners must have an ability to 'see the other side' of their work. Often, cultivating ambivalence in the image itself presents the most effective means of declaring this awareness.<sup>2</sup>

Three loose themes, related to irony, are apparent in this year's selection. I have named them: 'the museum of irony', 'faux landscape' and 'smart folly'. These divisions are as much visual as they are conceptual and involve aspects of each artist's ideology.

The 'museum of irony' describes a space where familiar items are displayed as artifacts, so as to disrupt the viewer's reading of them as simple objects. For instance, Simeon Nelson's *French Curve* plays on the awkward nexus between nature and humanity's constructed culture. Using the domestic aesthetic of formica on plywood, he layers a series of French curves in an elegant pattern of decreasing scale. One of a series of sculpted objects, collectively titled *Formal Decay*, this piece resembles a modern mandala in its meditative incremental structure. Although the organic curve embodies western ideals of harmony, its formal beauty seems curiously at odds with its banal medium. Nelson merges high modernism with

mass-produced materialism to subvert the notion of art's preciousness. However, as in his other crafted objects and installation work, this piece also contains an homage to the ordinariness of everyday objects.

Similarly, Robert Bridgewater's modestly scaled *Palpitare*, and Louise Weaver's quirky *Blush (I am transforming an antler into a piece of coral by crocheting over its entire surface)*, seem to jest at their own status as art, even as their exquisite craftsmanship and ordered display demand the title. Bridgewater's delicately fluted rod of bleached wood is intended as a folly. Although small, it emanates the organic resonance of a fossil. Its title also indicates life, as if the form on display is an item of natural history, extracted from but expected to speak for an unnamed environment. Weaver's assemblage of mock-artifacts also assumes a modesty which counteracts the profound beauty of its forms. *Blush ...* combines a range of materials with diverse connections to feminine history (craftwork and ornament) and contemporary visual culture: crochet in cotton thread over plaster, sequins, silk tulle and colour laser photocopy. Like a surreal museum display, it documents sources and origins which remain anonymous. Welling up from the artist's imagination, these minute monuments to the absurd recall the Surrealist's bizarre experiments with metamorphoses and spontaneous association. Both seductive and eccentric, they exude the aura of a partially known ancient history, a narrative sealed by time from knowledge.

A different brand of ironic museum exists in the work of Kate Beynon and Carolyn Eskdale. Beynon uses her Chinese ancestry as a vehicle through which to gain a contemporary perspective on her ancestors' cultural traditions. *Old picture with ladies' shoes, men's shoes* combines cheap western materials — chenille sticks (pipe cleaners) — with an ancient Chinese saying referencing the country's unequal gender identities. Translated, her wall calligraphy reads: 'son to grandson, from son to grandson on to great grandson and great great grandson'. These words, together with Beynon's replicated men's and women's shoes, convey the paradox of a tradition which honours life but binds women within positions of immobility and non-meaning. Despite this critical element, her work remains non-didactic. Instead, Beynon cultivates a cryptic message: her parodic monument alludes to the impossibility of ultimate communication between cultures and perhaps (on a more subtle level) between men and women.

By contrast, Eskdale's museum is a solely feminine zone; a form of domestic archaeology, both sensual and distant. Her *Reconstructed daughter's bed* literally reconfigures her own childhood bed; transforming it into an organic metaphor for her memory. By turning the bed on end

and rearranging its 'entrails', she creates a physical equivalent to the process of decay and death that is her recollection of all things past. Like Beynon, Eskdale makes her private history into a public poesy, thus ironising the intimacy of her subject. Her exhibit is a personal memoir, placed provocatively in a veiled space which is sewn tight, preventing entry or ultimate understanding. Although viewers can see into the space, they are told by its silence to come no closer. Eskdale implies: sight is not knowledge. Her carefully sealed object reminds us that all interpretations of art are, like memory, fantasies of reconstruction.

Patrick Pound and Mathew Jones also exhibit in the museum of irony. Pound expresses his anxiety about art's loss of originality. Much of his imagery queries the reception of artworks via books and the process by which artists enter the 'world library' of art history via printed reproductions. *Writing in a Library* reverses this dilemma by documenting literature through art. Just as historical texts dissect, enlarge and reduce original paintings, his mock library shelves contain 'details' of dismembered books, covers without content. Pound deliberately challenges the assumption that books are sacred entities, to be handled with respect and kept intact. By placing a photocopied print as a backdrop in the composition, he alludes to the mass-produced status of all literature. His 'museum' commits a crime against the aura of books, thus vindicating the original artwork.

Jones' installation of a replicated newspaper also critiques the way knowledge and information are constructed. As with his previous work, *250 copies of New York Daily News on the day that became the Stonewall Riot, copied by hand from microfilm records (scattered)* tackles the semantic problems of presenting gay culture. The Stonewall Riot of 1969 is regarded as an important catalyst for the public advocacy of gay rights. Jones chose this moment, as recorded by a 1969 paper, to query the gay community's co-option of the event as a cultural artifact. His paper contains 'forensic' evidence about the environment that manufactured the riot; not the political environment but the mundane reality of the time; its advertising and social events calendar. His action undermines the authority of Stonewall as a lynch-pin in gay history, but also perpetuates the significance of the event. The labour of reproducing an entire newspaper by hand appears absurd. However, this is precisely Jones' point: his ongoing stance against the popular presentation of gay identity is figured here as a mock archive of wasted effort. The work combines social homage with heresy as it documents his ambivalence towards the constructed solidarity of his own community.

As a point of transition, Charles

Anderson's self-portrait, *Untitled Bandaging*, sits in the conceptual space between the museum of irony and 'faux landscape' (a literal or fictional landscape which contests its own validity). This double-sided transparency relates to his previous work with environments, installation and performative space. It also continues his use of bandaging as a signifier of how objects are packaged and constrained by the expectations of a museum. Using a light box to illuminate his features in stark chiaroscuro, he posits his facade as a cultural display, a site of dispassionate ambiguity. On the reverse side of this 'true' self is a bandaged head, floating in an inky morbid blackness. This canny visual pun invites a conceptual game of power and perception with the viewer. The white 'death' mask suggests pain and denies the validity of the unbandaged face as the 'real' person. Its blind gaze suggests all figurative representation is ultimately a reinforcement of anonymity. As a museum display, the object cultivates its own obscurity by reducing the face to a false landscape of the self.

Nicola Loder's elongated photographic panels fit the category distinguished as *faux landscape*. Her *Landscape 1-4* represents deliberately fictional spaces which reveal their artifice. Their serene abstract images sit against the wall like scrolls, inviting meditation through attenuated colour and form. Although each picture appears to derive from a natural source — a horizon turned on its side — this assumption is challenged by their blurred and magnified features. As with many of Loder's earlier projects, these vast land portraits transform ordinary vision into a potent sea of abstract meaning: an aerial photograph of ocean and land metamorphose into sky and cloud, horizons become columns in a heady denial of gravity. The artist plays a game of optical trickery with the viewer to provoke a critique of photography's ostensible 'truth' to nature. Her evocation of a contrary sight prevents the location of meaning and remembers, instead, the ultimate distortion of all visual reproduction.

A more overt irony occurs within Paul Handley's *Anonymous landscape repositioned 1*. This dichotomous image reveals a split personality within the pictorial surface, an exterior and an interior or 'alter' surface. To construct such images, Handley seeks amateur paintings in junk shops, then takes an x-ray of their under-painted surface. Here, the original painting is photographed and attached behind its x-ray image: russet lines and texture appear as etched marks on the aluminium surface, resembling a topographical map of the same landscape. Through this process of visual dissection, Handley creates a metaphoric challenge to the verity of all landscape imagery. His structural revelations also imply a critical

reassessment of the aura surrounding master paintings, a tactic that renders all imagery equal, at least beneath surface appearances.

Philip Wolfhagen's sweeping depiction of the Tasmanian Central Highlands provides a more euphoric form of pictorial illusionism. One of a series of near identical landscapes, his *Imaginary Light, 41° South x 147° East* continues an ongoing project: Wolfhagen has portrayed the same region since 1992, as if painting one vast panorama. His title here suggests an almost visionary encounter with the land, an emotive link between the artist and the vista communicated through the subtle modulations of oil and beeswax on linen. Wolfhagen's irony lies in his passionate endeavor to express the infinite and sublime presence of a real landscape. He pursues his homage with endless patience and faith in his act. It seems he has adopted a personal mission to transcend the cultural act of painting by edging ever closer to the essence and source of his subject.

On another plane, Heather Fernon's manipulated transparencies declare their false reality from the outset. At first, her digitally scanned and reproduced pictures, *RSVP Red, Green and Blue* read as corporeal landscapes; visceral portraits of digestive fluids. Fernon uses confronting primary colours, interspersed with glimmering spurs which run like veins of mercury through each random composition. She transforms jelly, food dye and barbed wire into a virtual terrain, playing on the numerous meanings entwined within the kinetic surfaces. The brash gloss of the duratran prints deliberately mirrors the facade of commercial advertising. By mounting each image on a light box, Fernon connects her work to popular display boards and further ironises the status of her unclear domains as 'art'. Rather than reveal her meaning, she demands that the viewer interpret these eerie emotive arenas and 'RSVP' to her barbed invitation.

Optical trickery is also a strategy employed by Damian Moss. His *View* forms a visual puzzle which discloses the ultimate illusionism of representational painting. Like Loder, he creates an abstract space, saturated in silence and designed to reanimate the act of looking and meditative seeing. His false landscape appears as clouds, split by a horizon line which has been broken into four sections and reoriented as vertical lacerations in the canvas surface. Like much of his past work, this image is less about the subject depicted than the act of comprehending the subject. For Moss, the viewer acts as translator, placed in the uncomfortable role of decoding a poetic language which does not translate well into literal meaning. His contradictory space mocks the assumptions of pictorial realism and deflects the viewer's desire to interpret naturalistic painting as 'real' sight

and experience. In this, the work marks the beginning of the final ironic category: 'smart folly'. Moss creates a surreal joke, or trick painting, which indicates a philosophical desire to force the viewer into an active relationship with the image.

Gabrielle Brauer's cool abstract painting, *Interval*, also encourages the viewer to encounter its form through sensory association rather than literal interpretation. One of a series exhibited under the title *Plain Song*, this painting reworks the minimalist aesthetic of earlier artists — from Cézanne to Mondrian — by seeking a pictorial equivalent to the abstract experiences of music. *Interval* refers to the space between sound, the unnamed silence where form, line and colour communicate in a secret Braille. The dense patterning, visible pencil lines and delicately random application of pastel-coloured oil paint creates a blanket of soft texture which suggests both energy and stillness. Brauer's reference to modernist abstraction is both ironised by her contemporary context and redeemed by her aural reinvention of pictorial space. Her image captures a fresh angle on a familiar form of abstract painting by fostering a knowing sense of the object's folly.

For Ben Morieson and Sadie Chandler, all art making constitutes an act of deception and invention. Morieson's *Tile Board #730167* is a blatant folly; a corner of tiles cast roughly in plaster and left as an unadorned negative space. His mock-art is designed as a parodic equivalent to real details of domestic environments: the shower surround, the bathroom corner. By recreating ordinary or ignored spaces and features, Morieson challenges the viewer's dismissal of these locations as aesthetically unworthy. Recalling a Duchampian sense of the absurd in all things made by human hands, his installations ask viewers to enjoy the abstract pleasures of ersatz materials and, through this, to revise their assumptions about the material divisions falsely erected between art and life. Chandler's ploy is similar but in the reverse. She takes the seriousness of high art and transforms it into a popular iconography which blends profound implication with frivolous form. In *Melt*, she fetishises a cartoon-like shape, converting it into a reflective wall-piece with multiple meanings. Physically, the work resembles a spill of paint or liquid mercury. Conceptually, it continues her trademark combination of hip street-wisdom and strong sophistication. *Melt* also acts as a metaphor for the spotlight under which art is currently made: her object 'dissolves' under the heated gaze of intellectual scrutiny.

Kieran Kinney and Nike Sawas stage manage a more narrative dissection of popular culture and high art. Kinney's paraphrasing of photo-realism constitutes a brash punch at the glorification of war in North American commercial culture.

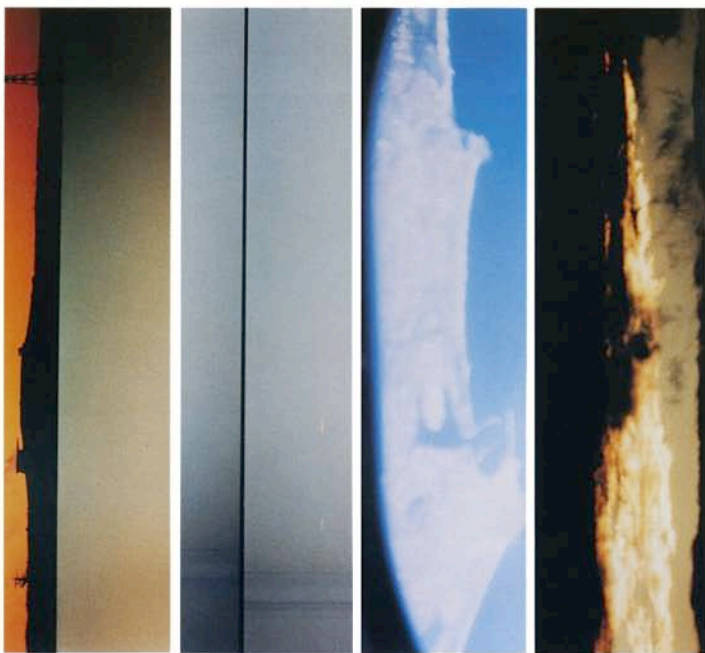
His canny image, *Eternity for men*, appropriates a highly visible perfume campaign and reduces it to an act of anarchic iconoclasm. Instead of lipsticks, he paints glistening bullets, positioned beside a caption which ironises the reality of human violence; personal and national. This work coincides with a series which critiques the 'pornographic' marketing of war in American magazines and popular media. By comparing this eroticised reality with the artifice of fashion marketing, Kinney highlights the hypocrisy and horror of human desire, thereby reducing coveted commodities to evidence of a 'sick' psychology.

Like Kinney, Savvas plays a visual trick on her viewer to reveal a fault line in contemporary capitalism. However, where Kinney targets market culture, Savvas' *United States* seems to direct its accusations at the commodification of art and meaning. A series of hard-edged concentric circles, rendered on aluminium panels, recalls Frank Stella's 1960s experiments in geometric form and colour. Below these, nine polystyrene rabbits sit in various poses, each featuring a carved number. Collectively, the installation creates a bevy of responses. Its title plays on the idea of a 'united' state; shared by the painterly targets and the vulnerable bunnies. On a more obtuse level, the work refers to the way art is attacked and annihilated by criticism and history, just as rabbits are hunted as 'sport'. Ultimately Savvas means her work to remain ambiguous. As a Greek Australian, her art contains a comment on the dilemmas of communication and interpretation. Her clever folly establishes a visual equivalent for the problem of how art and culture are 'read' rather than observed in their native 'state'.

Like Savvas, Lauren Berkowitz's art unearths many reasons and meanings. Her quizzical *Onion Sac Wall* denies literal interpretation and, instead, evokes a series of sensory and intellectual connections. As with her past use of recycled materials, these billowing onion sacks speak of a secret history; a memory of people, passage and containment which falls behind the aesthetic beauty of their metamorphosed form. Berkowitz's art is one of arrangement and interpretation; a domesticated poetry. Her 'sacs' suggest membranous texture and organic life; a magic Spanish weaving in homage to the tears of many fertile women who have cut onions in their presence. Structurally, the 'wall' reminisces about social barricades: great walls of the world, monuments to mourning and commemoration, protection and comfort. Berkowitz presents an architectural folly through a soft net of recycled materials, thus challenging the parameters of art's aesthetic and literal conventions. Her sewn sculpture both denies and claims the cultural narrative of its revived fragments.

Finally, Helga Groves' piece sits

strangely apart from the ironic reflections of those of her colleagues. Although it too references popular forms — pressed metal, floral decoration, gilded surfaces — *The Perfume River* bubbles with a heated faith in its own abstraction. In this, it shows an almost nonchalant lack of regard for the viewer's response. A meticulously crafted work it resonates on the wall like a sound-scape, alive with an internal energy. Its pressed metal, layered and coloured beneath a fine bronze mesh, exudes a sensual presence. The stencilled lotus flowers represent decorative reminders of the artist's residency near the Red River in northern Vietnam. Groves' sculptural canvas is complete within its own physical and conceptual depth and seems detached from the concerns of the artist, viewer and gallery space. Ultimately, it defies theoretical exploration and drifts away on a fresh journey towards the optimism of creative wilderness. Transcending irony, it abandons intellect for beauty and pictorial truth.



**Nicola LODER**

*Landscape 1 - 4* 1996  
 type C photograph  
 four elements, each 280 X 75  
 Collection: the artist  
 Photograph: John Brash

**Nicola LODER**

Nicola Loder was born in Melbourne in 1964 and received a Bachelor of Fine Art in Photography from the Victorian College of the Arts in 1989, a Postgraduate Diploma in Film from the same institution in 1992 and a Master of Art from R.M.I.T. in 1996. A selection of her group exhibitions include *Photo Access*, Link Gallery, Canberra in 1988; *Transparent Gallery*, Next Wave Festival, Melbourne in 1990; *Pure Cinema*, Charles Williams Gallery, Department of Architecture, R.M.I.T., Melbourne in 1993; *Labyrinth*, Platform Gallery, Melbourne; *Steam and Faktura*, Stop 22 Gallery, Melbourne; *Art on the Met*, Melbourne in 1995 and in 1996, *Rapport: Eight Artists from Singapore and Australia*, Singapore Art Museum, Singapore, Monash University Gallery, Melbourne, Canberra Contemporary Art Space, Canberra and Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane; *The Rupert Bunny Prize Exhibition*, Linden Gallery, Melbourne. Loder's solo exhibitions include *Untitled*, 200 Gertrude Street, Melbourne in 1993 and at The Basement Gallery, Melbourne in 1994; *Broken In My Mouth*, The Basement Gallery, Melbourne in 1994; *The Apprenticeship of Silence*, Centre for Contemporary Photography, Melbourne in 1994 and at Monash University, Gippsland Campus in 1995; and in 1996, *A Nostalgia for the Present*, Stop 22 Gallery, Melbourne. She is the recipient of several grants including an Australia Council Project Development Grant and is represented in various private collections and major public collections such as the National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne. Loder lives and works in Melbourne.





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