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Opening speech – Pontoon : Stephanie Monteith

Jon Cockburn
University of Wollongong, jon@uow.edu.au

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Dr. Jon Cockburn

Pontoon Exhibition Opening Address on behalf of Stephanie Monteith: 2004 Resident Artist. Wollongong City Art Gallery, Friday 24 June 2005, 7pm.

1. Good evening. My name is Jon Cockburn. I am a lecturer in design theory at the University of Wollongong and I have been asked to open this very impressive exhibition.

It is important that we start by acknowledging the original custodians of the land we are standing on, the Woolyungah people of the Illawarra.

2. Thank you to Stephanie and the Wollongong City Gallery for the invitation to deliver these few opening remarks on your behalf.

4. I first met Stephanie in 1993 when she commenced a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree at the College of Fine Arts, University of New South Wales. In 1994, in an Art Theory subject that I taught, Stephanie was a High Distinction student. In 1996, Stephanie graduated with an Honours degree, followed by a Master of Fine Arts degree in 2002, all completed at the College of Fine Arts. In her studies, Stephanie counted among her friends several outstanding fellow students, including David Eastwood, Cheryne Fahd, Nina Herbertson and Michael Neal.

5. TURNING TO CONSIDER THE IMAGES AND EXHIBITION:

One of the tools Stephanie employs in her technique of image making is a digital camera, and these brief opening remarks on her body of work will commence with an observation concerning the difference between analogue or film and digital photography.

In the everyday practice of analogue or film photography, the layering of an image is

a sign of ineptitude, incompetence or technical malfunction. The double or triple exposure photograph constitutes a mistake, unless serving as a document for an employer's time and motion study. Recently, however, the digital camera has largely eliminated this fault, as celluloid film is no longer pulled across the exposure platform by sprockets with the potential to jam as it is framed in front of the aperture. In effect, the digital snapshot has, with fixed certainty of infinitely malleable pixels, replaced the film camera's potential for capturing its imperfectly functioning mechanism through the metonym of layered images, each representing a fragment of distinct and different moments piled on top of one another and competing for visibility. The unintentional double and triple exposure fault of the older camera's mechanical means of reproduction is, in the digital age, constituted as a conscious process or post-production operation on the image via the appropriate software.

Likewise, the film photograph's flaw was only exposed in processing and well after the shot was taken, thereby delaying critical decision-making and opening up the possibility of creative play with the resulting image. In the age of digital photography, however, the image is open to be operated on almost immediately, to be deleted and erased with the click of a decision in less than a second.

Stephanie commenced many of the images on exhibition here tonight with a digital snapshot. Rather ironically, however, what she looked for in the resulting photograph was the unintentional flaw, or more precisely, what the French essayist and semiotician Roland Barthes described as the photograph's *punctum*. This term refers to the photograph's ability to arrest you when, without intention, it draws your gaze into considering a particular detail, regardless of its relevance to the photograph's overall message. This arresting detail takes on meaning for the viewer, or as Barthes put it, *punctum* "is an addition: it is what I add to the photograph and *what is nonetheless already there.*" (55)

In short, Stephanie, after taking advantage of the digital camera's facility, sees in its

output the very flaw it is designed to eliminate: unintended content. She then isolates this information and works back via older conventions of visual arts studio practice. For instance, Stephanie builds the watercolours using the traditional approach, but core content or subject matter is drawn by hand from the snapshot.

The same is true of her larger canvas paintings. These are all primed in the traditional manner, before an unrelated composition sketched in watercolour is followed by the final composition overlaid in oil. The first layer in watercolour acts as an echo of a past, a trace of a previous presence in the space to be occupied by the final image. In the case of the painting entitled *Packard,* reproduced on the invitation, the underlay was based on drawings from Stephanie's sketchbook, often randomly chosen, as a method of working through ideas. Interestingly, one of these sketches included an image taken off the TV News showing Prime Minister John Howard looking rather stupid, an image subsequently and ironically obscured by the exotic lines of the 1950s family car.

If one were to categorise the works on display here tonight you could do so in terms of four significant groups:

The first is the "Road Trip – Digital Camera Snapshot to Canvas" paintings. These works all began with snapshots taken from the window of a moving vehicle on a journey back from Melbourne. In their origin as process and as content these paintings offer a polite rejoinder to Walter Benjamin's observation, made in the 1930s, that: "With the increasing scope of communications and transport, the informational value of painting diminishes." (6) The Road Trip paintings include *Giacometti driving* (Fig. 1), *Coffee-and-hot-dog* (Fig. 2), and *Twin Town* (Fig. 3).

Fig. 1. *Giacometti driving*. 2005. 18 x 27cm.
Watercolour on cotton paper

Fig. 2. *Coffee-and-hot-dog*. 2004. 18 x 27cm.
Watercolour on cotton paper

Fig. 3. *Twin Town*. 2005. 18 x 27cm.
Watercolour on cotton paper

The second group of works is closely related to the first, and will be referred to as the "Driving Past – Digital Camera Snapshot to Canvas" paintings. They share the same method of beginning, with snapshots taken from the window of a moving vehicle. However, the difference in the second group of paintings is that they document an almost detached, and definitely mediated, gaze cast across a more familiar suburban terrain. Painting such as *Beast (Leichhardt)* (Fig. 4)*, Beverley Hills* (Fig. 5)*,* and *Wollongong* (Fig. 6) prompt recollection of the 1961 performance statement by American artist Claes Oldenburg entitled "I Am for an Art", part of which reads:

> I am for Kool-art, 7-UP art, Pepsi-art, Sunshine art, 39 cents art, 15 cents art, Vatronol art, Dro-bomb art, Vam art, Menthol art, L& M art, Ex-lax art, Venida art, Heaven Hill art, Pamryl art, San-o-med art, Rx art, 9.99 art, Now art, New art, How art, Fire sale art, Last Chance art, Only art, Diamond art, Tomorrow art, Franks art, Ducks art, Meat-o-rama art. (729)

Fig. 4. *Beast (Leichhardt)*. 2005. 18 x 27cm. Watercolour on cotton paper

Fig. 5. *Beverley Hills*. 2005. 18 x 27cm. Watercolour on cotton paper

Fig. 6. *Wollongong*. 2005. 18 x 27cm. Watercolour on cotton paper

Like Oldenburg, Stephanie lists the messages of the street-scape.

The third group of works is "The Images From Print Media". In 1984, the French academic Michel de Certeau, in his study entitled the *Practice of Everday Life*, observed: "the everyday has a certain strangeness that does not surface, or whose surface is only its upper limit, outlining itself against the visible. ..." (93). It is this "certain strangeness" of the everyday that Stephanie isolates and examines in her images lifted from print media sources, putting the visibility of this "certain strangeness" on notice, particularly in the work *American in Iraq* (Fig. 7). The image was taken from the *Sydney Morning Herald*, (*circa* early 2005). When asked why she chose this image, Stephanie pointed to the incongruity of the US soldier in Falluja, Iraq, standing in front of an exterior wall painting of a palm frond and the Iraqi flag. In the published photograph the soldier, a very real presence on the streets of Iraq, and the nationalist symbolism of Iraq painted crudely on a wall, seemed to merge – in

effect, the soldier no longer appeared as a human in front of a flat image, but as an image equally flat.

Fig. 7. *American in Iraq*. 2005. 18 x 27cm. Watercolour on cotton paper

The final and fourth group of works is "The Archive Of Family Images". The subject matter of these works represents the most personal and closely connected to Stephanie, and are immediate reminders of a line from Susan Sontag's writing *On Photography*. When discussing the role of family photographs, Sontag observed: "Time eventually positions most photographs, even the most amateurish, at the level of art." (2) However, in the case of Stephanie's work the elevation of images from a private archive of family photographs is done via all the complex intersections of creative decision-making just outlined. The works in this fourth group include: *Gertrude Cottage*, *Newton Stewart* (Fig. 8) and *Montrose* (Fig. 9). The last is taken from a photograph of Stephanie's mother aged about six years, holidaying on the coast of Scotland.

Fig. 8. *Gertrude Cottage*, *Newton Stewart*. 2005. 197 x 301.5cm. Watercolour and Oil on canvas.

Fig. 9. *Montrose*. 2005. 198 x 167cm. Watercolour and Oil on canvas.

6. DECLARE EXHIBITION OPEN

In concluding, the cultural trajectory of Stephanie Monteith's work has its beginnings with the montage techniques of the 1920s Soviet graphic designers, Georgii and Vladimir Stenberg. The Stenberg brothers' collaborative output of film posters rather ironically transposed from cinema to pencil, gouache and offset lithography the competing montage approaches of the directors and theorists Kuleshov, Vertov and Eisenstein. The next in line of cultural trajectory would be the mid-1980s American painter David Salle, whose work overlaps across the surface of the canvas scenes lifted from day-time television, *Penthouse* magazine centrefolds, and suburban interiors and backyards in Los Angles. Salle's approach has been described as "a strategy of infiltration and sabotage, using established conventions against themselves in the hope of exposing cultural repression." (Thomas Lawson qtd. Jencks 84).

Shifting along the tactics employed by the Stenberg brothers and Salle, Stephanie's work critically unpacks the age of digital post-production. As we all know, in contemporary design and photography studios there is very little mess: wet media and sheaves of paper workings have largely disappeared. The process of image manipulation often exists only in a file on the hard drive, accessible via the required passwords and software applications such as *Photoshop*. The creative process is visible only on the computer screen before on-line dispatch to a designated high-end printer. The final output as print object hides creative decision-making, as its layers are merged and locked from view for all those without authority to it as intellectual

property. Paradoxically, by shifting her creative processes through the digital to the conventional studio output, Stephanie's work makes visible and allows the rough and raw edges of the creative decision-making to emerge as a trace just below the surface of the artwork's dominant motif.

This opening address started by looking at the distinction between old and new media in photography and Stephanie's employment of the latter as a tool in image acquisition and processing. The way in which she has made use of this tool is a profound and important contribution to the visual arts. With great pleasure, this exhibition is declared open.

Works cited

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