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Naked Royals – Federation and the Third Dimension.

Dr Jon Cockburn.

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Image originally printed with article in *Agenda* showing Gregory Taylor's *Down by the lake with Liz and Phil*, 1995, vandalised and in the company of a corgi.

This essay reflects on a petit cause célèbre that played out during the National Sculpture Forum in Canberra over April 1995. The centre of attention was two roughly formed concrete seated figures depicting naked Queen Elizabeth II and Prince Philip of the United Kingdom. The issues to be reviewed concern loyalty, allegiance and two inanimate lumps of concrete, stuff formed and shaped to eventually disperse at a rate more rapid than most lumps of concrete normally would. In the event, however, *The Large Bask, Liz and Phil stripped bare*, or, to give the work its formal title, *Down by the lake with Liz and Phil*, sculptor Gregory Taylor's three dimensional foray into 15 or so media grabs of fame, substantiated more than the work's base medium's inherent entropy would otherwise permit. It, the work, the sculpture, exposed the transparency of our collective inadequacies: it did that! *Liz and Phil stripped bare* also brought the Canberra National Sculpture Forum 95, and its co-ordinator Neil Roberts, a degree of publicity and critical comment far beyond that usually attracted by Australian sculpture events and exhibitions. In doing so, Taylor's sculpture accomplished something profound: *Liz and Phil stripped bare* was our first true and strong image of significance in a nation's search for its identity on the eve of Federation's centenary. Taylor's much exposed yet insufficiently reinforced figures, in their short but vociferous public life, elicited and at

the same time became witness to the first popular and focused expression of a significant change in our collective national consciousness. *Down by the Lake with Liz and Phil* explicitly demonstrated that, in the few years left before 2001, 'we' Australians were becoming concerned in more than a mere diarist sense with questions interrogating what being 'we' for the past century has meant and what it might mean to be 'we' Australians in the next century.

Quite ironically, in the wake of the sculpture's unveiling, monarchists were suspected of, if not beheading the *Liz*, then at least colluding through tacit approval of 'her', of 'its', beheading: An act of desecration whereby the object, *regent-in-absentia*, was rendered non-identity and returned to the world of nameless inanimate objects and stuff. The irony of that act of desecration was that when the histories of Australia in the late 20th century are published in the next few years, the great 'media grabs' that matter, those signposts that illustrate a society's history, will no doubt include a succinctly captioned reproduction of the concrete, headless *Liz* next to the obviously naked *Phil*. Why? Because no image to date has so poignantly signified the very thing that monarchists hate, despise and seek to block, that is, the drift of 'we' the people towards contemplating Australia as a nation totally independent of an English, northern-hemisphere, European monarchy – a monarchy whose presence in future republican Australia would then be only as tourists on Shelly Beach, or as foreign dignitaries amongst others.

What can be said of the issues and questions that pursued Gregory Taylor's rather mediocre renderings into history? What will make the image of these concrete figures more permanent than their physical presence could ever have done? The answers lie in the analysis of a set of social abstracts: abstracts dealing with notions of propriety and taste; abstracts dealing with duty to an unseen and unknown higher order and its defence – with treason, no less; abstracts dependent on a quaint medievalist sense of chivalry; abstracts referencing domestic political antagonisms that were dangerously mixed into a historicist soup.

That abstract notions of propriety and taste should occupy much of the debate surrounding *Down by the lake with Liz and Phil* seems incredible in this age of Ween; drive-by-shootings; the Duchess of York; Jeff Koons; Bosnia; Bill & Hillary; *Priscilla Queen of the Desert*; and the Royal Easter Show. But the work was never broadly contextualised nor broadly placed relative to significant cultural, social or political determiners: well, not initially. The abstract of propriety and taste, however, took its run from a restricted understanding, or more accurately, a restricted positioning of *The Large Bask (Down by the lake with Liz and Phil)* in the context of conventional monumental and memorial sculpture.

It seems obvious that the majority of those responding to *Liz and Phil* stripped bare did so in terms of its position vis-à-vis that class of bronze and stone to which the seated *Queen Victoria* outside the Queen Victoria Building in Sydney belongs. Rationalist and figurative, this traditional convention in sculpture has, over the past two centuries, taken on the gravity of collective focus in its form as War Memorial, epitomised by those bowed bronze or marble soldiers and sailors found on cenotaphs. That, however, is not the only function of this tradition in sculpture. Personal, private and exclusive memorials are commonplace. Likewise, this tradition in sculpture is not necessarily memorial; it is more often than not monumental – a monument to a thing, event or person – and just as often celebratory. The intrigue caused by the friction over *Liz and Phil* was that the rational purpose of this convention, its intelligibility to society in general, became multivalent. For the monarchist, Carey McQuillan ('Tale...', 1995, p. 1 & p. 4) it was memorial: for a number of others it was metaphor, a metaphor of human vulnerability, a populist *memento mori*. However, can a conventional figurative sculpture ever hope to be more profoundly metaphorical than it is descriptive, more profoundly metaphorical than it is a grab in a larger narrative?

In this event, it was these larger narratives informed by abstracts dealing with duty to an unseen and unknown higher order and the defence of those values that motivated the most forceful response. Carey McQuillan (1995), referred to as 'The Monarchist' in the article quoting his reaction to

Taylor's sculpture, named his duty to defend an unseen and unknown higher order as his historically cemented privilege.¹ But McQuillan confused the abstract with the flesh-and-bone subject, Elizabeth Windsor, before then compounding his delusion by displacing the same feelings and emotions onto a couple of rather badly rendered lumps of stuff. This exercise of animism by McQuillan, in giving life to the soldier or policeman's oath of allegiance, was as sad as it was entertaining: it was also dangerous (as his linking of Australian Prime Minister Keating's recent visit to Germany with long dead Nazi leader Adolf Hitler). For the tradition that McQuillan claimed to be protecting is one that places greater importance on the collective approval of those values the oath symbolises before it does the authority of any particular supreme individual. It was on this point that Cromwell undid a monarch, a piece of English history conveniently forgotten in the fray over stuff. To whom do the French, American and Indonesian armed forces swear allegiance? And does it matter as much as their collective recognition of the values they are asked to uphold? And who or what do they love until the day they die? In stark contrast, on the 2nd of August 1934, all soldiers in the Wehrmacht were made to swear an oath of unconditional obedience to Adolf Hitler, Führer, and Supreme German Commander (Ramm 1992, p. 197). No abstract about it: specific flesh-and-bone subject with particular and definable authority and no chance of collective values, just supreme personage. McQuillan's failing is that he confuses inanimate object with his supreme subject, and his supreme subject with his oath to protect a set of values collectively agreed upon (1995, p. 1 & p. 4). What McQuillan and the monarchists in general fail to recognise is that this same set of values is now undergoing collective questioning and possible redefinition.

Amongst the abstracts implicit in the direct actions taken by the monarchists while *The Large Bask* was exposed to glory by the lakeside were those of the quaint medievalist's sense of chivalry. Knights and Dames to the rescue of Regal modesty. The question is, how do you account for actions of medievalist chivalry, taken on behalf of members of a family who include accounts of toe-sucking fetishism among their personal profiles along with well and not so well managed photo-opportunities? On hearing of *The Large Bask (Down by the lake with Liz and Phil)*, McQuillan

drove to Canberra to ‘cover up the disgusting thing’ (1995, p. 1), raising the question of the dress-sense of McQuillan and other presuming proper tailors to concrete monarchs: spray-on adhesives and T-shirts! In fine-arts, Edgar Degas’ *Little Dancer*, modelled in wax and dressed in real clothes, uncomfortably pushed perceptions of realism in 1881.² Contrary to his intentions in clothing the concrete figures, McQuillan pushed the conventionally recognisable effigies of office out of that office and into the mass of the vernacular. Clothed, *Liz and Phil* was reduced to the effigy of just another couple of retirees on a trip to Canberra, an ironically republican outcome.

One of the issues raised in relation to the representation in concrete of known and elevated personages was that of offence – offence not only to those depicted but also to those who hold in awe and respect the ones depicted. This offence quickly became a catalyst for some rather odd political references, namely Paul Keating’s penis and Carmen Lawrence’s vagina (Nelson [Wahroonga] ‘Letters...’, 1995, p. 16). In the understanding of Carey McQuillan, the domestic political references were dangerously mixed, especially in his taking offence at Paul Keating’s diplomatically calculated praise of West Germany’s postwar political democracy. McQuillan (1995, p. 4) inexplicably confused recent German history with its National Socialist past, implying that an Australian Labour Prime Minister was somehow in league with a Nazi 50 years dead. McQuillan’s taking aim at Prime Minister Keating’s visit to Germany is itself an offence, one that confuses the past with present, the real with the impossible to become an offence aimed at the office of Prime Minister – “Silly old bugger!” Offence also sought its defence by suggesting that it was unfair, if not discriminatory, that the English royals had been singled out for demeaning depiction rather than other prominent leaders, such as Australian Prime Minister Paul Keating and Annita Keating (Crane [Springwood], 1995, p. 16), Singapore Prime Minister Mr Lee Kuan Yew and Mrs Lee Kuan Yew in company with US President Bill Clinton and Hillary Clinton (Long [Wahroonga], 1995, p. 16), Prime Minister Mahathir’s genitals (Senior [Eastwood], 1995, p. 16), or the Pope (Ash [Bondi Beach], 1995, p. 16). The above are political or religious leaders, not representatives of an imposed and perpetual monarchy, and it is this distinction that made *Liz and Phil* so powerful in its moment.

The Large Bask, Liz and Phil stripped bare, Down by the lake with Liz and Phil proved to be some object not only for the acts of passion it evoked, but for the fact that two poorly rendered lumps of concrete in a conventional figurative idiom were articulating a greater presence than has been achieved by any number of deconstructivist performances, multi-media installations, photo-text exhibitions or interactive computer-generated visual arts in this country for at least a decade. Why this should be so was easy enough to understand, but it did point to the limitations of the other forms of art practice when it comes to inserting themselves in a visibly national manner and asserting their concepts, content and relevance directly and forcefully into the debates over the redefinition of 'us' Australians as we all head towards the end of the century. Gregory Taylor's sculpture acted before the fact at its point of contention, whether or not through conscious design, unlike most recent 'mediated' art forms that act after the fact, dependent as they are upon various montages of theory and things, or of archived images, to construct their dead presence.

But acting against this last observation is one further paradox, unforeseen at the time of debate – that of the revenge of the mechanically reproducible. The lumps of concrete, decapitated and damaged, were carted away in the back of a ute, but, like Freddy Krugger, the nude royals returned: they returned as potential content for postcards in the tourist industry, postcards available for purchase by anyone travelling to the nation's capital, including visiting foreign dignitaries, European monarchs and their ridiculous kith and kin. Unforeseen by all but the most astute and entrepreneurial, this was capital's opportunistic short-term flow-on from the event itself. And, in a buoyant market, the intensity of beliefs and emotions aroused may even recompense the sculptor for the expense of being at all interested and active. As for the death threats following from RSL-member Bruce Ruxton's call to arms (Roberts, 'Tale...', 1995, p. 1 & p. 4), well, no amount of postcard sales will help the artist's family in the absence of Salman-Rushdie-like invisibility. As for the visibility of the original work in the nation's collective history and its perpetually redefining energy, well, that is guaranteed through no small part played by Carey McQuillan.

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Notes:

¹ Carey McQuillan's comments, framed as those of 'The Monarchist', can be found in an article entitled: 'Tale of two men: Art or outrage?' published in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, Mon. April 17, 1995, p. 1 & p. 4.

² There is extensive literature on the impact and significance of this sculpture by Degas. Two useful references are: Nochlin L 1990, *Realism*, Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, and the entry dealing with the *Little Dancer* in Moffett C. S. et al. 1986, *The New Painting: Impressionism 1874-1886*, Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, San Francisco.