2008

The restless cosmopolitan

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Publication Details
I. A. McLean, 'The restless cosmopolitan', 2008 Greenaway Gallery Adelaide Catalogue essay for the exhibition "Gordon Bennett"
"Gordon Bennett is Australia's most recognised postcolonial Aboriginal painter. While he has always resisted the cult of Aboriginality (to the extent of refusing to identify his art as Aboriginal or himself as an Aboriginal painter), critics generally considered this a deconstructive tactic by which Bennett could further interrogate the politics of Aboriginality and identity."

(excerpt from Gordon Bennett's abstract art: the aesthetics of commitment and indifference by Ian McLean, 2004)

Works chronology

Essays

· The restless cosmopolitan by Ian McLean, 2008
· Who is John Citizen? by Ian McLean, 2006
· Gordon Bennett's abstract art: the aesthetics of commitment and indifference by Ian McLean, 2004
· Gordon Bennett's Notes to Basquiat (911) by Greg Dimitriadis & Cameron McCarthy, 2002
· 911 (with Apologies to Walter Benjamin), by Ian McLean, 2002

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The restless cosmopolitan by Ian McLean, 2008

Gordon Bennett always tells a good story, and a major attraction of his work is its narrative structure. Not any more. His recent abstract paintings forsake the discursive qualities upon which he built a very successful career. Bennett has a history of abandoning successful modes for new ones, but nothing in his oeuvre matches the audaciousness of this turn. Be it radical, risky or simply foolish, what other artist in his position would (or could) make such a wild move?

Bennett's previous work may have shown an intense interest in abstract art (particularly the art of Pollock, Malevich and Mondrian) but it was always discursively referenced in elaborate postcolonial allegories that were implicitly cynical of abstract art's esoteric claims. However his recent paintings, which primarily quote the early work of the American minimalist Frank Stella, have no obvious narrative, postcolonial deconstruction, or even parody. Instead he seemingly pays homage to Stella and, ipso facto, the creed of abstraction. In the context of his earlier work, it is not at all obvious what Bennett is doing or intending.

By his own admission Bennett had exhausted his previous Basquiat theme, and was also exhausted by the intensity of his discursive mode. Hence I initially expected the abstract work to be a temporary therapeutic hiatus before some new onslaught. However this has proved to not be the case. Bennett has tackled this new direction in his art with his usual diligence and perseverance. He has been making abstract paintings for five years (as long as the Notes to Basquiat series).

In one sense all art is abstract, and Bennett's graphic dexterity (evident since he was a student) reveals his understanding of this. However the abstract series have developed into a real commitment to the purely aesthetic pleasures of art, as well as to that 1960s dictum that less is more. Bennett reduces the graphic and compositional complexities of his previous work to relatively simple arrangements of form and colour. This is not familiar territory for Bennett. Despite his previous works being in a fundamental sense about various lacks, their narrative content was invariably in excess.

However the abstract works do not seem to me to be about returning to a more simple way of doing things or of getting back to some core or essential truth. Bennett's use of Stella's art as a starting point signals this, for Stella jettisoned the metaphysical pursuits of the previous generation (such as Pollock and Rothko) for a more upfront phenomenological world—which is why minimalism developed into an art of surface appearances rather than...
GORDON BENNETT : GREENAWAY ART GALLERY : ADELAIDE...

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

2008 Gordon Bennett, Greenaway Art Gallery, Adelaide
Gordon Bennett Survey, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne; Queensland Art Gallery / Gallery of Modern Art, Brisbane; Art Gallery of Western Australia, Perth

2007 Gordon Bennett, Sutton Gallery, Melbourne
Gordon Bennett, Bellas/Milani Gallery, Brisbane
The Expiation of Guilt, Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, University of Cambridge, United Kingdom

2006 Gordon Bennett, Prints, Bellas/Milani Gallery, Brisbane
John Citizen, Greenaway Art Gallery, Adelaide

2005 Gordon Bennett, New Work, Bellas/Milani Gallery, Brisbane
Gordon Bennett, New Work, Greenaway Art Gallery, Adelaide

2004 Gordon Bennett, New Work, Melbourne Art Fair, Sutton Gallery, Melbourne
Out of Print, Dell Gallery, Queensland College of Art Gallery travelling exhibition, Brisbane
Gordon Bennett, New Work, Bellas/Milani Gallery, Brisbane
Gordon Bennett, Newworks on paper, Bellas Gallery, Brisbane

2003 White Paintings, Sutton Gallery, Melbourne
Figure/Ground (Zero), Sherman Galleries, Sydney

2002 Notes to Basquiat: 9 11, Greenaway Art Gallery, Adelaide
Notes to Basquiat: 9 11 (Part II), Bellas Gallery, Brisbane
Notes to Basquiat: 9 11 (Part III), Sutton Gallery, Melbourne
Notes to Basquiat: The Reverb, Sutton Gallery, Melbourne
Notes to Basquiat: The Reverb, Bellas Gallery, Brisbane

2001 Notes to Basquiat: Modern Art, Sherman Gallery, Sydney
John Citizen: Coloured People, Sherman Gallery, Sydney
Contemporary Australian Art From the Paul Eladis Collection, University of Queensland Art Museum

2000 Notes to Basquiat (Samo) Another Millennium, Sutton Gallery, Melbourne
John Citizen: Coloured People, Sutton Gallery Melbourne

1999-2000 History and Memory in the Art of Gordon Bennett, Brisbane City Gallery, Brisbane; Ikon Gallery, Birmingham, UK; Arnolfini, Bristol, UK; Henie Onstad Kunstsenter, Oslo, Norway
Gordon Bennett, Sutton Gallery, Melbourne

1999 Notes to Basquiat: One Tense Moment, Bellas Gallery, Brisbane
Notes to Basquiat: One Tense Moment (episode two), Sherman Galleries, Sydney
Home Decor (Calculus), Sutton Gallery, Melbourne

1998 Gordon Bennett, Bellas Gallery, Brisbane
Notes to Basquiat, Gramercy International Art Fair, New York, USA
Home Decor (Algebra), Bellas Gallery, Brisbane

1997 John Citizen: Flatland, Bellas Gallery, Brisbane
Preston + De Stijl = Citizen (Cold Comfort), Sutton Gallery, Melbourne
John Citizen: Sacred Cow, Sutton Gallery, Melbourne
Mirror Mirror: The Narcissism of Coloniality, Canberra School of Art Gallery, Canberra

1996 Australian Art for the Bridge, Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane
John Citizen: Sacred Cow, Bellas Gallery, Brisbane
Home Decor (after Margaret Preston), Bellas Gallery, Brisbane
John Citizen: Works on paper, Sutton Gallery, Melbourne
BLACK; Fear of Shadow, Bellas Gallery, Brisbane
Performance with Object for the Expiation of Guilt: Apple Premiere Mix, Noosa
Regional Gallery, Noco
Mirror Mirror (The Inland Sea), Sutton Gallery, Melbourne
Surface Veil, Bellas Gallery, Brisbane
Dismember/Remember, Bellas Gallery, Brisbane

1994 How to Cross the Void - works on paper, Sutton Gallery, Melbourne
Present Wall, installation, Institute Building, Adelaide
Performance with Object for the Expiation of Guilt, Bellas Gallery, Brisbane
D.I.U.H! (Down Under Homi), Sutton Gallery, Melbourne

1993 A Black History, Sutton Gallery, Melbourne
Painting History, Contemporary Art Centre of South Australia, Adelaide
Painting History, The Drill Hall, Canberra
Mimorama, Ian Potter Gallery, University of Melbourne, Melbourne
How to Cross the Void, Bellas Gallery, Brisbane

1992 The Colour Black and Other Histories, Bellas Gallery, Brisbane
Relative/Abject, Bellas Gallery, Brisbane

1991 Gordon Bennett, Bellas Gallery, Brisbane
Dialogues with Self, Art Gallery of Western Australia, Perth

1990 Psycho(d)rama, Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane

1989 Gordon Bennett, Bellas Gallery, Brisbane

SELECTED INDEX EXHIBITIONS

2008 Biennale of Sydney, Revolution - Forms that Turn, Art Gallery of NSW, Sydney
Lines in the Sand: Botany Bay Stories from 1770, Hazlehurst Regional Art Gallery
The Pine Rivers Art Award Winner's Retrospective 1993-2007, Pine Rivers Regional Art Gallery

2007 Artist Makes Video: Art Rage Survey 1994-1998, Dell Gallery @ QCA, Brisbane
Eye to I, Ballarat Fine Art Gallery, Ballarat

2006 Queensland Live! Contemporary Art Touring Exhibition, Brisbane Photographic Portrait Prize, Art Gallery New South Wales, Sydney
Bangu Yilbara: Works from the MCA Collection, Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney

2005 A Man's World, Museum of Brisbane, Brisbane
Colonial to Contemporary – Queensland College of Art 125 Years, Dell Gallery, Brisbane
Prism: Contemporary Australian Art, Bridgestone Museum of Art, Ishibashi Foundation, Japan

2004 International Biennale of Contemporary Art in Prague 2005, The National Gallery in Prague, Czech Republic
The Plot Thickens: Narratives in Australian Art, Heide Museum of Modern Art, Melbourne
Future Tense: Security and Human Rights, Dell Gallery and Gallery Space, Queensland College of Art, Griffith University, Brisbane

2003 The Three Colours, Gordon Bennett and Peter Robinson, Heide Museum of Modern Art Touring Exhibition, Melbourne
Likan Miri - Connections. The AIATSIS Collection of Art, Drill Hall Gallery, Australian National University, Canberra
Place made: Australian Print Workshop, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra

2001 Heavenly Creatures, Heide Museum of Modern Art, Melbourne
Terra Aterius: Land of Another, Ivan Dougherty Gallery Touring Exhibition, The University of New South Wales, College of Fine Arts, Sydney

2000 War Without Boundaries – Australia and the War Against Terrorism, Australian War Memorial, Canberra

2008 Many Happy Returns: Celebrating Heide's 21st Birthday, Heide Museum of Modern Art, Melbourne
When I was Young – Impressions of Childhood, Global Arts Ink, Ipswich

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