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Method For Form's Sake

Artists: Sarah crowEST—*A Serious Of Objects*—Australian Experimental Art Foundation, May 22nd—June 28th; Sam Howie—*Survey*—and *Return Threshold*—Patrick Hartigan, Michelle Nikou, Marcin Kobylecki, Charlie Sofo—Fontanelle, May 18th—June 8th; Peter Atkins—*Silence*—and James Guerts—*Topography Of Water*—Greenaway Art Gallery, May 28th—June 22nd; Juz Kitson—*Still Life: Sleep of non-being*—Greenaway Art Gallery, June 25th—July 25th; Joe Felber—*Kontaktraum : Auslander (space of contact—foreigner)*—Contemporary Art Centre of South Australia, June 13th—July 13th.

by Ken Bolton

Method Acting?

A Serious Of Objects—Sarah crowEST's exhibition at the Australian Experimental Art Foundation was the solution to a problem—and for the artist a choice between a show immediately rather than later within that gallery's program.

The exhibition's arrangement presents the viewer first with a choice between a wall of small pictures—photographic documentation of work in the studio—of work being done and of individual pieces; and, opposite, a

black, slightly irregular croquembouche shape on a plinth placed before (and a little beneath) a gridded assemblage of handwritten notes-to-self that (we are told) belonged to the artist's father, all of them reminders or prompts to action ("newspaper", "thermostat", "full squirt bottle", "bath haircut", "repair television" and some with an addressee—"one dozen eggs please"). The vaguely conical black shape looks like shit. (Amusing to say in a critical review.) And it reads as addressed to (or summing up) the deceased father, who may have warranted it, but how are we to know? *'My dad's reminders and remains'* was the title. Did it tell of the artist's hostility, was it a comment on the measure of his life? In any case an argument we weren't privy to.

The wall of works and 'working-in-the-studio' photographs throws up a lot of amusing correspondences between the pictures: oddnesses of size—things tiny, fragmentary, and tall; odd juxtapositions, funny faces and masks, and some unusually lumpy shapes. Some of these things are only conventionally 'amusing'—the convention being that 'Art' shall be ideal, uplifting, ennobling, beautiful etc. So lumpy is funny. But not that funny. And the convention we all know—don't we?—has been a dead-letter, a straw man or punching bag for about a century. Yes, it retained some life for many decades, yet surely lessening (or less and less reliable) as each passed. But of course, still there for all of us. One correspondence was between a picture of crowEST, tall, in dark colours, working at some image while a small girl in red worked similarly beside her: an echo and a contrast of size and colour. Cute. There is a deal of this in and between the images on the wall. But this particular juxtaposition is itself echoed in one of the next works the viewer comes to, a line of identically formatted rectangular, wall-mounted blank panels or 'abstract' pictures. These are mostly golden, yellow, tan, beige, a grey or two, and on through to a line of

whites and near-whites. A colour sequencing. On the floor below at the left end lies a, fallen or forgotten, bright red panel. The echo with the girl. Deliberate, surely? If not, then the natural outcome of the same aesthetic method: of setting up a regularity or a dominant against which to pose an exception. It might be reflex. Equally, it might be method.

Quite apart from the glance the two works might be said to throw at each other in this instance, the fallen or abandoned red panel has the interesting effect of casting the whole line of panels above it as sculptural, object rather than image, unity rather than sequence of pieces. Like Carl Andre's line of bricks: single bricks/ or an object, as implied by the (unifying) title '*Lever*'? We conceive it one way and then the other, like the duck/rabbit illustration, but cannot entertain both simultaneously.

The sculptures. Earlier in crowEST's career these objects were not offered so much as stand-alone sculpture but as gestures, or as outcomes of an action in her performance work. It's hard to see them as interesting sculpturally. In *A Serious Of Objects* there are two. Perhaps one of them is here to behave so that the other may by contrast be seen to be misbehaving? The well-behaved one sits, uninterestingly, though admittedly a *little* oddly, on a plinth. More interesting is its other, '*accomplished naturally without effort*'. Given two black spots to make 'eyes', it seemed to sit disconsolately on the gallery floor. Both sculptures were perhaps interestingly unprepossessing: a kind of Bartelby-the-scrivener refusal to perform sculpture's usual chores (command of space, projection of bulk, of mass, texture etc). They looked (deliberately, one supposes) makeshift and fake and inadequate—'shifty', you might have said, if they had also suggested the requisite braininess. They also looked as if they meant to address a very 'cheap' sort of taste: an entity that might be castigated,

then, that might cringe and be ashamed. The floor piece looked humorously embarrassed, the towel pressed to it like Linus's security blanket—as if it were caught, say, on the way to the bathroom without its pants on. 'Abject', is that the word? I realize I am anthropomorphizing here, but the works invite it (the eyes, the blanket) and don't do much without such a reading.

While it solved a programming problem, *A Serious Of Objects* may not have been the best option for the artist. CrowEST has, over a long time, been interesting, unpredictable and entertaining very many times—across a range of formats (sculpture, installation, performance, and graphic, painted and moving image). Subjects have been serious: anxieties, imprisoned refugees, body-consciousness, identity issues; her mode is usually quirky and humorous. The works have been sometimes surpassingly telling and, usually, funny.

No doubt lesser works are produced along the way. Perhaps all these works come about through the same processes, some of which are likely unconscious and incorporate habit, even tics, as well as deep thinking and intuition. There may be some consciously regular tactics and processes applied as well—as standard method or as fall-back procedure. Who would know? CrowEST herself seems to regard it as an unknowable, or to in fact suggest that, whatever 'the process' that goes on is, it is uncharacterizable.

After decades of practice why would an artist choose to focus on her method? Should we blame Melbourne? (Or 'Melbourne'—some fictional idea of Melbourne artworld fixations?) CrowEST's seems a risky strategy: instead of exhibiting the interesting highpoints thrown up by her working

practice, the artist chooses here to exhibit the much less interesting practice itself. And in fact I suspect that this is a *representation* of a practice.

Seriousness: the title signals it as one of the targets, fall guys or straightmen to the artist's own comic figure. Indeed "A Serious of Objects"—while making its feint towards comic typo, "serious" for "series"—signals an equivalence for the artist: the series *is* serious, ipso facto: 'series' signals 'the serious'. CrowEST will take the mickey out of it regularly. Order and series stand for The Serious, for The Law, against which her work will cut a dash. The most usual means will be a kind of visual bathos: deliberate failure (the broken series with the fallen, leading, red item), the sculpture sitting distressed on the floor, the big beside the comically miniature.

Acting similarly was the sacrosanct rectangle of cotton duck material (signalling 'artwork', picture). CrowEST showed three of them (numbered titles, so part of a series, hessian or unstretched brown cotton duck hanging a little loosely), all three with small scraps applied on to the surface. 'Pictures', then, the universality (as a format, or framed 'situation') *subverted* by the folksy tradition of applique and by the determinedly personalizing effect (each piece being taken from named individuals, mostly, I think, within the art scene: the donor names were listed beside each picture). The arrangements of donated or purloined scraps of material were inert and uninterestingly spaced and scaled. CrowEST needs both sides of the dyad to work their effect: but with these particular works the 'serious' end did not hold up. No tension.

Finally, a pleasant but innocuous show: a line of pieces, already described—*'The Gertrude Sequence'*—brought the viewer pleurably up against a range of colour differences and textures, a range against which some came to the fore as 'different': heavily textured, pillow-shaped, or speckled and discoloured (beautiful, pale, jammy reds and pinks streaking and staining an otherwise white rectangle; a white given the look of an expensive Italian biscuit—small, repeated flecks of red or green, like tiny rosettes and a very dispersed grid of yellow, 'biscuit' spots enlivening the overall white). The same group, as I have said, also existed as a sculptural unity: a line of fixtures (not pictures)—a unity broken (and demonstrated 'in the breach') by the presence of the fallen, un-mounted red piece. I've come back to this piece, I think the only effective one in the exhibition. Mutedly effective, not a big hit, but genuinely good, if not very 'avant-garde'. Maybe the most 'deliberate' in the exhibition, too: the serial format of *'The Gertrude Sequence'* is not what I associate with crowEST, though she has in the past produced many 'sets' of things, 'families' almost.

The catalogue essay attempts to run protective interference on behalf of *A Serious Of Objects's* overall sally. But it is hard to manage. Clarity of expression, and logical clarity, are the enemy of what the essay would like to suggest. CrowEST's method is not successfully described *as a method*. The method might give rise to a good deal of repetition—Sarah crowEST's works generally look identifiable enough—but I wonder if it naturally delivers series? Is series crowEST's (uncharacteristic) desired end here, intended to indicate (the presence of) method? 'Method' can be so validating in the post-graduate art world. Is that why? Psychological depth was absent from these works. It was signaled, merely, by the two blobby sculptures—and unclear as it pertained to *'My dad's reminders and remains'*.

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Just Foolin'?

Two exhibitions running at Fontanelle in May proved to be worth a visit. ***Return Threshold*** was a small group show, while Sam Howie (*Survey*) showed in the immediately adjoining space. *Return Threshold* featured work by Marcin Kobylecki, Michelle Nikou, Charlie Sofo and Patrick Hartigan. The overall air was Casual. But no one is casual, really, about their art. If it's out there you want it to win, to impress. I would guess. There were two works from Hartigan, three works by Kobylecki, one from Sofo, and five by Nikou. Of these there were three I liked a lot. One was **Kobylecki's 'Randy's Roll'**: a band's set up: mikes, etc and drum kit, on a small stage. All of it made of white pizza box cardboard, whitened some more with a quick touch of flat white acrylic. A pizza box did for the stage. It was good for claiming and shooting back all its meaning at once, in an instant: rock'n'roll and its punky ethos of high energy and burnout and junk food and happy nihilism. The work was graphically clear and looked 'down' and 'wasted' and cheery. Most palpable was the correctness and wit of the fit between subject and materials used, an air of 'nailed it!'

Another work was an at-first-to-me-mysterious set of flat, arabesque and heir-loomy pendant shapes (oval, shield- or escutcheon- like) that **Michelle Nikou** had mounted in a small cloud-like constellation on a wall. They were intriguing because their edges were rough (it was cast metal) and the burnished surfaces were a grey, yes, but a series of different greys: all of them soft and with hints of pink and bird's down, and paler grey also in the mix. They looked talcum and aged—antique, delicate and grandmotherly.

Of course they were casts of the shapes that one punches from boxes of tissues and paper towels, so as to be able to tug them out for use. The shape is always thrown away. The title announced their source-identity, for those who looked (I hadn't): *'Tissue Box Shapes (II)'*, all of Nikou's pieces were fairly recent—2013, 2014.

Nikou has done this before. The normally absent stands in for the presence that is not to hand: a kind of memory of box after box ... of, what, sniffles, troubles, worries? Or just times endured or suffered—passed anyway. They seem at the same time able to cast a cynical glance at this—or to be able to remind us of it with affection and acceptance. Is life trivial, or heroic? tragic—or bearable, good? The clincher is that such Nikou works are interestingly particular as aesthetic objects and highly generalizable as metonymic representations.

Patrick Hartigan's moving image piece, *'The People Will Be Healed'* (2012) looked good: footage shot in an eastern European city: forlorn and slightly lost feeling. The camera followed people—as if trying itself to get its bearings—around a small park, to foyers of buildings, to park benches and maybe into a hospital or rest home. Then moved to a series of crucified Jesus sculptures, and saints and martyrs. These looked both hopeless—i.e., unlikely to deliver on their promise—and comically forlorn, pathetic: boofheaded, fierce, cruel and so on. Would they heal anyone? The work seemed to be about hope, maybe about hope as sufficient in itself. Charlie Sofo's film, too, might have been good, but it wasn't running while I was in the gallery.

Formal Matter / material form

Sam Howie, in *Survey*, showed three banks of heavily painted, impacted almost, works. Each of the three consisted of multiple layers of similarly treated sheets of paper, each layer so thickly painted—and at one time, quite damp and heavy—that the sheets had curled or warped in drying. Each sheet is painted both sides. As Tom Squires' essay points out, we might choose to read the paint, therefore, as covering one face and curling around the support to cover the other side: a continuity that would suggest a slightly different ontological status to each piece, as existing just that little bit more *three-dimensionally*. On the other hand they would seem to have a 'front' and a 'back': one side (the 'front') has been privileged with more coats of paint: so, more features or incident for the eye and thence, I think, reversion to painting status.

Howie has been working for some time with these processes, and with these effects (of warping etc—but also the optical effects of layering, transparency, seeming depth and flatness)—effects of materiality and its bearing on the conventions of 'abstraction', but also on those of process, performance, 'action'. The results have been various in kind and in, well, 'aesthetic achievement'. I've seen some I've liked more, but this group, too, were good in their fairly narrowly defined way: they were 'pretty' (probably the least of his desiderata), and interesting for the questions they teased one with.

To me these works seem to engage with a nexus of issues all derived from the days of a sixties/seventies, *Artforum* world. Which might be because the issues counted for me then and I respond to them still. They may still be relevant? It follows that I might be wrong that they *are* what Howie is dealing with. Squires imputes some kind of interiority to the works that I

don't buy, whether it is (also) Howie's intention or not: it seems too tenuous, too *so what?* too 'intentionalist', and a little dopey—though this last is a value judgement. Like so much else. A strong sense of physical presence has been the telling thing for me with Howie's work: this group didn't register at the higher end in this respect but somewhere in the middle. But Howie's would seem to be an ongoing project, a kind of research. There will be more to come.

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Make-work, divination, and voodoo

At Greenaway Gallery there showed in June Peter Atkins and James Geurts. Both bodies of work were a little more limited than I had hoped to see. One always wants greatness. But artists are entitled to (and will, in any case) work on more minor things as well. **Peter Atkins** showed a sequence of smaller, more design-oriented panels: black with minor inflections (a gold line or two per panel, thin, straight, just accents on the regular black format). These were abstracted from LP covers he had picked up in second-hand stores, the gold accents' positioning derived from the lettering on those originals, the images themselves being deleted. Did they 'isolate' an aesthetic of a particular era, or genre? Maybe. I didn't find it interesting and will leave it at that. The project doesn't seem to me to be of much moment. *Silence*, as an exhibition title, might have been a small joke reference to the deletion of the 'loud' image of the singer or musician. Not a bad joke, but small.

In ***Topography of Water*** James Geurts presented two groups of work. One, '*Drawing In, Drawing Out: Sydney Harbour/Pacific Ocean*', showed

works that attempt a species of psycho-geography, though not psycho-geography as I have understood the term—and not very useful as geography or for anything but a very subjective process and outcome. Decorative, ‘expressive’ maybe, though not either to any high degree, I thought. Sort of ‘Duke Frank’ in look, though underpowered.

More promising were works in the group collected as ‘*Drawing: Psychogeography*’. These employ large-format polaroid photography and the exposure of the chemical layers of the film to extremes of temperature encountered—on the site that is ‘portrayed’. Drawings are made via (to quote the gallery sheet) “gestural intervention” on the film’s surface (hence the exposure of the chemicals to the impacting weather conditions). An arbitrary process, I think. But it generates images that are interesting as *abstract paintings*. They should probably be scaled up a great deal to maximize their effect. Do we want ‘paintings’ done this way? Do we not? These seem not a very compelling project. But, again, maybe not Geurts’s overriding activity at the moment.

Next up at Greenaway (June 25th—July 25) was a solo exhibition by **Juz Kitson**. I might refer anyone to my review of her earlier work, viz—(http://aeaf.org.au/downloads/13_1_FORM%20GUIDE.pdf): the current show, ***Still Life: Sleep of non-being***, was in the same vein thematically and technically, but amped up a good deal. I am sure these were much more technically proficient. In the main they consisted of what might be taken for votive presences, but ‘baleful’, ‘brooding’ and maybe ‘threatening’. They hung on the wall, each capped on top with a ‘head’ (often a skull shape, sometimes skull with horns) and a depending ‘body’ beneath, often distended. All were richly decorated with a profusion of breasts, beads, shells, fur and feathers, plant forms (buds, roseate

foldings, the usual suspects), entrails—and impressive sexual organs with, tellingly, coarse pubic hair. Pagan was the word they call up. Mithraic is the general look—imposing, slightly ominous and ‘cruel’, and confrontingly sexual. Apart from the West’s bad-faith, guilt, fascination and fear in relation to sex—all of which I am constitutionally signed up for, I guess, like everybody else—Kitson seems to me to be trading here not very seriously in mumbo-jumbo. On MTV clips this may count as art, or at MONA. For my money it is kitsch.

The technical skill behind it, I am willing to believe, is probably considerable. One tactic is to tap the usual frisson that goes with hot imagery delivered in a cool medium. Television crime drama does it regularly: ethereal religious music indicating perversion and murder and threat. Kitson has a wall of cool white ceramic floral shapes interspersed with engaged vulvas and penises looking similarly floral, organic, symmetrical, echoing the rose forms that surround them. All that white porcelain. What a lot of dusting, I thought.

Cool and hot, and the conventionally *nice* (decorative floral imagery) with the conventionally *not-nice* (the sexual). There are plenty of old-fashioned binaries the work depends upon.

Kitson’s drawings had the unfortunate effect of aligning the whole to an aesthetic reminiscent of *Oz* magazine illustration: inert, vaguely art-nouveau- and Beardsley-derived drawings for an old free love ethos. Her strength is decorative work with porcelain and interesting profusion and variation. Maybe this should have been in the Jam Factory.

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Ça plane pour moi

Joe Felber's exhibition at the Contemporary Arts Space of South Australia, *Kontaktraum Auslander (space of contact—foreigner)*, ran throughout the CACSA spaces manifesting as a floorpiece installation with sound dimensions added, and some sculptural elements that may have been independent of the floorpiece or, as appears likely enough, absorbed into it. The themes could be read or discerned clearly enough I think. The artist's take on them could not be divined so certainly. That is, the floorpiece—and the overall total-work that it bound to itself by incorporating the other elements—was concerned with the movements of populations, refugees, immigrants and emigrants, across national borders and with the consequent instability of notions of sovereignty and identity. *These things are on everybody's mind.* And Felber's work signals that they are on his too.

There is no indication that the Swiss-Australian artist is running the provocative Nordic/Aryan-Russo/Eurotrash vision of, say, **AES+F**. Recall their work in previous Festivals here—at the Jam Factory a few years ago, and subsequently at AGSA—was the work *'Allegoria Sacra'*? These pushed a very them-and-us view ... of the European tribes and the Other. (In fact they seemed to imbue everything with a quite repellent otherness, in a Lars von Trier kind of provocation, using a retro 'Aryan art' aesthetic stylization—very Prada, very Calvin Klein, very Bruno Bischofberger, if you remember his gallery's advertising, rather Adolf.) We can suppose Felber's work to wring its hands more sympathetically.

Kontaktraum Auslander at CACSA has virtues. But it also has some weaknesses. One of them is the need that we do a degree of supposing. This is not a matter of obscurity or difficulty but of the work's vaguely gesturing at what it means or what it seeks to represent. It is both a problem of method and of matter: what can it be saying that is new, or that is specific and particular, if it must only gesture? And that we know what it means derives from the unlikelihood that anything else might be meant, at least within the liberal and well-meaning art world.

The virtues? Well, the floorpiece was colourful and energetic, and 'interesting'—one read (slogans, phrases, symbols, signs) but also identified, recognized, racial and cultural 'types', noted registers of rhetoric and kinds of discourse. This mental accounting was the main pleasure the floorpiece generated: it came of its Olympic profusion of colours (those that reminded of national flags: red, white, blue, but—moving one out of the Anglophone world and 'old' Europe—towards Asia, Central and South America, Eastern Europe, Africa: red, yellow, green. No pastels, no designer shades). And there was pleasure/interest deriving from the many graphic elements that were distributed over a grid of such colours. Words, slogans, faces, gestures: old European codger in baggy suit, with hat and walking stick; stock types of mother, child, refugee—non-European refugee, and European—but, also, just *interesting types of faces*, largely but not exclusively European, I thought. (And of course a range of quite distinct types come under the heading 'European'.) The system, the maze—that I take to represent national and international structures—is geometric, hard-edged, abstract—in contrast to the represented figures. The whole conveyed confusion, conflict, misunderstanding, puzzlement (and senses of bewilderment, need and longing, anxiety, uncertainty) but

conveyed also a will to overcome these things, to achieve parity, acceptance, understanding, recognition. Along with a gentle or sympathetic irony.

There is a countervailing view to the charges of vagueness. To relate to Felber's work as an occasion that calls for 'reading' is perhaps to take it the wrong way: the installation presents a *situation* rather than a text or palimpsest. The situation does consist to a degree of symbols, signs and meanings—and requires reading, recognition etc—but would have us experience and respond rather than stand apart. Spatiality more than composition, flux more than sequence.

Asking the work to perform as a thesis might be said to ask too much but also to be asking the wrong thing. On the other hand the main register in which '*Kontaktraum: Auslander*' works is as a painting, one made up very much of signs and symbols, images, and intimated 'codes'.

The *sound quotient* was a lesser element—at least in my experience: two sources, both intermittent, triggered by the viewer's presence, gave a sense of further confusion and multifariousness, in one instance a kind of quizzically mocking music.

The *sculptural works*, subsumed or suborned into the overall 'total-work', were familiarly enigmatic presences: a stack of paintings, their painted faces invisible, bound tightly together as though for consignment or storage; a box of files; a box of slides—again, both of them closed to the viewer. The accompanying catalogue suggested that the viewer would or should respond with a feeling of curiosity as to what was removed or denied. I took them to be instances of surplus culture, a little like Europe's

fabled mountains of cheese—or as the ('high' or 'deep') culture and cultural knowledge that would be unfamiliar to the new immigrant: instances of "access denied". (I was anything but curious. Unless they were Rembrandts I was happy enough to be spared looking at pictures the artist chose not to present.) The 'documents' supposedly locked away I took to instance the opacity of a foreign country's laws and regulations. I wasn't curious as to what the paintings might show: I took them as surrogates, ciphers—and thought them, as objects, reminiscent of Beuys and Kiefer, and a little second-hand in that respect. (The catalogue regards them as "a pungent criticism of a consumerist art reception".)

To an extent this second-hand quality is deliberate, chosen nonchalantly and lightly: Felber operates with the various idioms of late modernism and its aftermath. His use of them is partly quotation, partly implied critique: the styles are used to evoke their claims to totality, truth—and, as parody, to deny them. They are symbol systems used (sampled, evoked) to indicate our need for them—rather than their efficacy—and to demonstrate our familiarity with them. Generally Felber employs a kind of de stijl-derived esperanto of abstraction (de stijl, bauhaus—monochrome and typographic, rather than painterly). He does this with admirable ease and panache. It seems a kind of amused channeling but also produces work of great assurance and visual *éclat*.

But *Kontaktraum: Auslander* didn't feature much of this work. It shows up in the book that accompanies the exhibition and which might accompany a full retrospective of Felber's work, if there were to be one. It is warranted. On opening night—which I missed—there were performances and collaborations between the artist, dancers and musicians. If these strengthened the sense of 'total-work', the sculptural pieces, I think, would

have seemed all the more lonely. But I wasn't there. The Contemporary Art Centre wasn't big enough for a retrospective sampling of Felber's work and practices, yet the unity of the whole that was offered instead was tenuous, as though at some level *Kontaktraum* really did want to be that larger, dreamed of exposition.