

GRAND GESTURES

Peter Carlino, Deni, Patrick Doherty, James Doohan, Tom Freeman,
Louise Morrison Saunders, Jacob Ogden Smith
January 20th - February 5th, 2006 @ **THE MOORES BUILDING**
Reviewed by Matthew Jackson

I approached Grand Gestures with some trepidation, this is a ‘themed’ exhibition and themed exhibitions are often very problematic. Artists, when left to their own devices can produce great work, relevant to the concepts in their own art practices. However, when you hang the yoke of a theme around their necks the artwork runs the risk of becoming contrived and awkward.

The theme of Grand Gestures is masculinity and to my pleasant surprise none of my previous fears were founded. These artists rose to the occasion and showed both a sensitivity to the subject and the space they had chosen to exhibit.

I was keen to see the work of Louise Morrison Saunders in regards to masculinity, as I have been a great fan of her work in the past. I was surprised to come across a collection of wooden assemblages leaning against the wall, like ancient indigenous artefacts (if the ancient elders had had access to Bunnings.)

When in doubt I always refer to the title of the work in the catalogue, this one is A Wigwam for a Goose’s Bridle with the names of four men afterwards. It dawned on me Louise has presented to us the most holy of holies, the purpose made tools from that most sacred space, a man’s shed. The title of the work speaks obviously of the secret nature of men’s business, a smokescreen to befuddle the uninitiated. “What’s that, Dad?” “It’s a Wigwam for a Goose’s Bridle.” It’s this whimsical nature that makes Morrison Saunders work so successful, she does for sculpture what Leunig does for cartoons.

Among the more conceptual works in the show was Jacob Ogden Smith’s Father-Son, two large insulated silver panels hung on the wall, one larger than the other. A simple enough description of Father and Son, but the way these works are lit gives the piece its kick. Two halogen lamps stand where the viewer would normally stand, one faces and illuminates the father while the other faces away from the son and bathes the viewer with an intense light.

I was very moved by this work and it’s clever but subtle discourse of the emotional relationship between fathers and sons.

I generally dislike video work due to its often amateurish nature, however the videos presented at Grand Gestures by James Doohan and Peter Carlino were both clear and free of the unpleasant visual clutter and arty static hiss that tend to garnish other works of this kind. Carlino sits stacking CDs, facing himself stacking CDs, gradually building the twin towers in an ordered manner. A simple gesture but one that talks both about the duality of mans nature, create/destroy and also the need to create order from chaos.

James Doohan's video focuses on the Threat/Risk side of masculine nature, a pair of hands covered in what appears to be bubble gum carefully navigate the process of piercing, dislodging and embedding skewers, scissors and other sharp metal objects in the gum around the fingers. I was mesmerized by this sometimes disturbing imagery which brought to mind "A Nightmare on Elm Street" and its knife handed villain, Freddy Krueger.

Patrick Doherty brought to the show the only paintings in the exhibition. These large unstretched canvasses have an urgency about them, a frenetic life of their own. Reminiscent of Chagall, Doherty's characters glow against their partially painted surface. Doherty has depicted an alternate mythology, a misogynist butcher god amongst his submissive minions, faceless women cavorting with unicorns against a fantastic landscape. Is this the darker side of the artist's nature? The fantasy world the modern masculine retreats to when reality strips him of his crown, perhaps.

Both Tom Freeman and Deni explore the realms of gender dysphoria with some beautifully rendered photography. Deni in particular with the series She was moulded in his own image produces a wittily engaging series of photographs of an androgenous Pygmalion. Classical poses with a modern twist.

Tom Freeman has built a life-size bedroom in shocking pink; entitled If I only had a daughter that certainly catches the eye. Complete with Barbie accessories and toys in every shade of pink, the structure has a definite novelty value to it. Freeman has also photographed this lurid structure in various public spaces. As imposing as the structure of the bedroom is, it lacks the subtlety of the photographs. I believe it could have been left out of the show entirely, as Freeman's photographs are more than strong enough on their own.

I was pleased with Grand Gestures, though in hindsight I wondered where was all the muscle flexing and bravado I have always associated with masculinity. Perhaps we are entering a new enlightened era of masculinity or maybe we are just fortunate to have artists such as these who are willing to explore such a theme so sensitively.