

Les Choses Qui Tombent

The art world is no slouch when it comes to the shift toward globalisation. It is quite viable these days, some might even say expected, for artists to travel, to make forays into the art scenes of other countries on other continents. You can always find a way in. It changes the way people make, though, in all sorts of ways. For some artists this itinerancy becomes a profession unto itself. The roll-in, pack-out, draw-in, pack-up, fuck-off art show has become a staple, particularly on an institutional level, and particularly when it comes to Australia, the tyranny of distance and all that. When Fabien Giraud and Raphaël Siboni turned up here for the Melbourne Festival I don't suppose there was a reason to think their show at Gertrude Street would be any different. They seemed kind of quiet at first, they seemed slightly awkward when it came to explaining their practice to a newcomer; there was talk of space junk, vague mention of ceramics, they had some students assisting them in the RMIT ceramics department, and talk of a fascination with the notoriously recalcitrant pillar of Gertrude's main gallery. As the night wore on though they giggled and spoke about a plot to secretly burrow a hole in the clay and piss in it when their assistants weren't looking, then seal it up. The talk moved on to Alain Badiou, and Fabien became fascinated by the idea of there being a Badiou reading group in Melbourne, and of what these Australians might make of this French celebrity philosopher. They wanted to make a film of the reading group and show it back in Paris. What I am trying to convey here is that the ideas being thrown around shifted and shifted, and the enthusiasm of these artists tracked the shifts and threw itself in at every opportunity. These men, they are very adept at taking what they discover and running off with it, throwing it back and forth between themselves. There was in the beginning, though, a certain hesitation about Australia, the ol' backwater thing, and what are we going to do here for this expanse of time, but what became apparent some weeks later when I convened with these artists again at the same pub where we first met was that the Australian landscape had descended, smack, whump into their idea of the place, and I don't mean just the place in geographic or spatial terms but in terms of the people that inhabit it, the cultures that have been sutured onto the landscape and are eking out an existence here. If you look at this artist's work from a European perspective, Fabien said to me something along these lines, you think, oh yes, that is his schtick, that's what he's interested in. But if you look at it from here, you realise it is grounded in the sense that we are on a wafer-thin layer of this place, this place isn't us, this city isn't settled in, doesn't have fat deep taproots that plunge downward the way Paris does. Meantime Fabien and Raphaël were working ardently in their windowless studio, getting high on oil-based ink and latex and bitumen, producing this evenly rendered mezzotint surface on a massive sheet of copper, and building up these huge ceramic forms with so much surface that the surface subsumed the forms, they are ugly, dire-looking things, and there is the option of learning of them, before or after you look, that the forms are based on photographs of space junk, some pieces that have deigned to release their orbital grip and come racing back to their origins. Many, it should be noted, come to rest in the Australian desert. If they were just seen in material terms, these bits of space junk, one might ask if they are any more meaningful or interesting than any given rock or piece of iron on earth, but it is the idea of where they have been, of the aura that they are endowed with from having been through such extremities, that they constitute fragments of idealistic hope

and also embodied residual ignorance (now that all these millions of pieces of space junk are orbiting the earth at something like 13,000 miles per hour, from years of astronauts ejecting waste, losing grip accidentally, blowing up failed structures to preserve secrets, anything that goes into space now has to be heavily armoured so it can get through this forcefield of debris) – these things give them power. If you don't know that about these objects though, the ceramic replicas I mean, they could be read as rather obnoxious Modernist sculptures that might be at home in that shagpile nook at Heide. Either way, riffing off space junk or off formalism or a child of both, they talk to the fifties, these black, smelly, ominous crags of optimism. The head of ceramics at RMIT dropped into their studio to see what they were doing with the forms. 'Whatever makes you happy,' he said something like that, eyebrows raised. I thought that was pretty great. Read on a material level I wasn't sure what I thought about putting these works that discourse with traditional forms of artisanship in the context of Gertrude Street, where ceramics and printmaking aren't really a presence; wouldn't this work have been more appropriately situated in a gallery where there was a pre-existing dialogue with these traditional media? I think Fabien and Raphaël liked that though, that they were bringing traditional media into a space where they are often ignored. Throughout the exhibition there is a sense of things being opened up and flattened out, it's not quite iconoclasm, but close. On one of the vast copper sheets in the front gallery, the gesture of the artist's hand repeated ad nauseum to produce an expansive, uniform surface, inked but not printed, no final execution, no ta-da. And alongside it, accorded equal treatment, another inked sheet of copper bearing only the marks of transit. In the centre of this room, somewhat enigmatically, is displayed an extravagant-looking camera lens like a big black phallus on a plinth, but the lenses all replaced with window glass. Its partner piece is in the next room, small, in a corner, the desert sunset filmed over an hour through the lensless lens on a lossless camera to produce a perfect and pure sheet of colour that shifts through the spectrum of the disappearing day like a long poem. All the objects in the exhibition are levelled out with little wooden wedges, an embracing of the provisional, a salute to this place perhaps. So, taking a wide arc back around, something important that these artists brought here was a responsiveness, an openness to the place, and an agility which enabled their shifts in understanding to flow straight into their work. Nick took them out to Broken Hill to see some desert, and when they got back Fabien emailed me a couple of photos. One of them was of an arrangement of about forty plastic folding chairs before a lectern and a PA, the backdrop an expanse of desert as far as the eye could see. I spent some time thinking about what it must have been there for, assuming they found this scene out there and documented it. For grey nomads to do some stargazing, Saskia and I decided. It turns out, though, that they had set up the chairs, lectern and PA themselves, and made a film of the arrangement that went for about 45 minutes, with the sound of the wind in the microphone. A chair falls over at one point. There is no other visual action in the film. Whenever they travel somewhere as artists, they said, they are asked to give a short lecture, but in this instance they decided to ask for a short lecture from the wind, to see what it has to say. We need more of that in this country. Asking the landscape what it has to say. It has plenty of things to tell us (insert Ian McDonald flute riff here).

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