

“THE WHEELS COME OFF, THE WHEELS GET RE-INVENTED” — A space-chicken to Captain Beefheart

Artists:

Lee Salomone— *altre voci / other voices*—Australian Experimental Art Foundation, September 21st—October 20th; Jeffrey Smart— *Master Of Stillness: painting—1940—2011*—Samstag Museum, October 12th—December 14th ; Katie Barber— *Perceivable (painted) Objects*—Sam Howie— *Apainting*— jointly at Felt Space, October 3rd—October 20th; Mark Valenzuela— *Entry*—Nexus, September 27th—October 26th; Pat Brassington—at Greenaway Gallery, September 19th—October 21st; Jeffrey Harris— *My Father’s Table*—Light Square Gallery, October 10th —November 1st; Matthew Bradley— *Space Chickens help me make Apple pie*—Fontanelle, September 23rd—October 28th;

by Ken Bolton

Late delivery

Ah, the **Jeffrey Smart** survey: I went to it grinding my teeth—Smart’s work so often leaves one feeling duded, and irritated at their seeming self-satisfaction—only to find that he has actually lifted his game. Right up to the present, and starting, I think, in the 80s, there are works that are greater than the sum of their formulaic parts. His art is minor, but there are pictures that stick with you, such that you’d think about rather than wish you could forget. These are firmer, darker (no pastels), observed rather than reduced (observed and painted—or, seemingly, observed in-the-painting) rather than reduced by Design. Many of Smart’s pictures seem to have had all substance syphoned out of them: reality

looks very unconvincingly thin, a report about it but not the real thing—
schematically bleached, blenched, flensed and dried out.

The very early paintings are popular. Some of their charm is related to a kind of hindsight: they look pleasantly more effortful technically than the later work. But they would not be enough to signal a real talent on their own. Here the formula is first beginning to come together: forlorn contemporary non-space, an isolated figure mysteriously out of place, a little threatened or challenged by the emptiness: the pram on the beach, the punter near the freeway or overpass. Realism of a kind. Then a kind of Neo-ism begins to supervene: simplifications and reductions, colours keyed to an artificial Scanlens Gum kind of bleak cheer, an infantile kind of minimalism and an irony proffered so that the picture 'accepts-no-complaints'. 'Existential'? Well, time with them was, though the pictures themselves weren't. Such was my view.

Some of the late works begin to break the mould. Do they feel their way back to some of the curiosity that lay behind the earliest paintings? There is no way of verifying these things: they seem the result of greater thought and have, anyway, produced more interesting selections of image—and better painting. The technique seems less as if it is offered for admiration in advance of the painting or via the painting (though paint-surface is never especially interesting in Smart paintings).

Smart's work can be very pat (as statements of angst, loneliness, unfulfilment) and uninteresting as paintings: the tactic of reduction-to-design works against it (the uninflected areas, the uniform keying of colour, the arrangements of objects and space so as to be 'discovered' aping geometric abstract composition, the relentless alignment of all to the plane and rectangle of the picture, the exposure in high sunlight, the vast amount of detail shed so as to point archly to their playroom building-block construction). These pictures do not make much

comment and are not much to look at. A few from this period though, do stand up: *Morning practice, Baia* (1969) seems not to wish to sucker the viewer but simply to offer its very light poise for our delight.

Jeffrey Smart's work is popular enough: people are relieved to find something they recognise and a joke they understand. Though that same joke must pall. Anyway, seeing the show out of duty my view of Smart remained for a while intact: there are well known pictures I've disliked intensely for their glibly barren, arid, sere scenes and regular citation of the 'lone individual' (always dwarfed, well to one side of the picture, a little abandoned). But there were also stronger paintings that rise above these categories and these means—that complicate them or relax them. Many are from the last ten years. The content and meaning of the work are unchanged, but the works seem fully entitled to claim it as achieved, earned. The pictures I mean are these.

Off Brindisi (1985) A (lone) figure seated in the back-deck sheltered compartment of a Mediterranean ferry. (We sense the throbbing engines, the smell of oil, the uncomfortable waiting-to-arrive, the rocking of the boat, tedium and loneliness). And then we see the second figure. Both are isolated.

The Underpass (1988-89)—a complicated view down upon intersecting flyover ribbon roads, framed very forcefully and tensely.

Art gallery in a shopping centre (1985) shows exactly that: a commercial art gallery located within a shopping centre, the gallery looking a little like a Mondrian in itself, and with great reflections in the polished flooring. A piece of the gallery's art is present but only as another element within the picture's overall play on De Stijl-found-*in-nature* contrasted with the setting's three-dimensionality and air of impersonality. The painting within the painting is a slightly vague and

dusty, late 19th century Australian landscape. The latter is only jokily or ironically the 'art' quotient in the picture.

The red warehouse (2003): a country setting with a truck outside a long barn, or an agricultural warehouse. Like the *Underpass*, the *Brindisi* picture, and the *Clive James portrait*, this composition sits in an interestingly tense relationship to its frame: almost but not quite square within it. (Many, of course, are simply interestingly cropped by the frame, but this was something more.) Close to these pictures swell interestingly, or take on a hardness—reflecting the grip, or the initial vision, of the conceiving eye that saw the possibilities of the chosen motif.

A number play cannily with large swatches of colour, and rewardingly for the viewer. (Sometimes this tactic is merely graphically striking, but doesn't have much hold and we treat the picture as if it were like an advertisement in a magazine and move on.) *Morning, Yarragon siding* (1983–84) and—more borderline—*Portrait of Clive James* (1991-92) are examples. This last, when seen close to, makes a pleasant gift of its vast expanse of yellow: corrugated metal-sheet fencing, broken regularly by its vertical pattern of striped shadow and with half the area more wholly shadowed to a mustard yellow. Clive James's tiny head and torso appear high up in the 'distance', an amusing joke. The Yarragon painting makes most of Smart's standard moves but with a less willed éclat and to more consummate effect.

The early middle period—after Rome?—seems to reduce too simply and programmatically, a routine sizing-up, adjustment of angles, reduction of colour and detail, sharpening of shadows etc. Subjects seemingly chosen for resembling Jeffrey Smart pictures. The later pictures seem more genuinely observed and observing, less headlong in the rush from reality to design, the abridgements seem less mechanical, less uniform, less undiscerning and our eye stays longer. Arguably we think longer and less conclusively. The colours have

escaped the glib gelati-decorative high key. I had thought Jeffrey Smart painting engaged the viewer only to laugh and say, *You get nothing—game over—ha ha*. What I took to be their cynicism seemed ‘of the time’ and so, by some Pop Art convention, not to be objected to. *It was unhip to feel cheated?* The Samstag exhibition’s particular successes share slightly less of the ‘family resemblance’ feel of much of Smart’s oeuvre—and they tend to look more firm, less thin than the regular blue, pink and yellow urban industrial scenes that were routine. They *are* of the same family though. They *are* Jeffrey Smart paintings. Almost none of them were reproduced in the catalogue.

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Lee Salomone’s exhibition *other voices / altre voci*—at the Australian Experimental Art Foundation over October—was something of a hit: attendances were good, the amount of unsolicited feedback was far, far above the usual and all positive. What brought this about was a very well conceived and mounted installation. *Other voices* hit some very important and telling bases: it filled, and held, and defined, the space in which it was shown. While it was visually knowable fairly quickly—(its ‘gestalt’ was quickly grasped, that is)—sensory information continued to be read by the eye and by our proprioceptive nerves (so this attention/this information was not redundant): the form of the work established (or made the viewer register and confirm) the size and shape of the gallery and also had the viewer attending to light and shadow. To these things Salomone’s work wedded significant cultural meaning. It might be argued that the work was unusual in poetically grafting meaning onto factors of physical extension and materiality and in having these read, metaphorically, as time and even ‘experience’.

One entered the main space of the gallery through a fairly narrow opening to encroach in a step or two upon a vast, suddenly opening space—the white cube of the gallery. This space was demarcated by the work within it which consisted of variegated long planks of timber floating in parallel, suspended from the ceiling by thin dark string. These planks—all differently worn and weathered from use in aspects of the building industry, but all more or less ‘of a kind’—were aligned with the gallery’s rectangular shape, and so ran ‘away’ from us into the distance. They were hung, variously, from about hip height to head height—like a flotilla of airborne balloons, an armada, a fleet. The lighting was subdued—a kind of half-light made up of bright and of relative dark: spots overhead threw down narrow pools of light that overlapped to some degree and left some parts of the room—and parts of some planks—in relative penumbral half-light. The lighting also threw strong shadows of the planks onto the floor—a further cranking up of the effect of a fleet: the shadows, too, could read as coming towards us and as if thrown on an ocean floor down through an aqueous medium.

Overall the light and shadow combined to soften the vast room. The legibility of the space’s extent—how far to the walls either side, how far to the far end wall—could be read more by attending to the demarcation of space by the planks. (Many of which would have been used for just such work in their time, in tiling, in pouring cement, in cutting and sawing.) This involvement of our senses with the work, in more or less automatic/somatic orientation, was very beautiful and produced almost a tingling sensation, a kind of excitation.

And, of course: these planks represented individuals (whose own small number stood in for the much vaster number of their fellows) who had emigrated from Europe to Australia in mid-century to embark on lives of very hard work, and of social and cultural deprivation. Everyone has some idea—and is usually aware how limited their idea must be—of the sacrifice, hardship and isolation this must have imposed... also ideas of the gradual rewards and acceptance, and we know

that the rewards were poor consolation for what was given up in leaving, say, Italy or Yugoslavia, to come to Australia. One prospered. But how much prospering was done? One escaped poverty, one had a family—but for a life in which you must harden yourself to disappointment, be ambivalent or sharply critical about a great deal, and give up your family in Europe to raise one amongst strangers.

The installation gave both a sense of the perilous adventure of emigrating and the rearward view of looking back on a life-course like this, like these: these were planks no longer in use, belonging to retired workers—hence the painful nostalgia.

Anyway, the gallery space—the work—virtually sang with these beautifully tensioned meanings. It was a piece with great emotional affect. That said, I was disappointed that the artist did not trust his formal sense. It seemed to me that some bets were hedged and unnecessarily. The exhibition catalogue carried Salomone's claim that the featured planks were "imbued with memories". In my view this is not true in any useful sense. Each of them may have been so imbued for their owners: that is, the planks might recall specific of their memories *for them*. Imbued or not, for any other viewer they can only be symbols of, or metaphors for, such memories (*as an empty set*—though we might have an idea as to what sorts of things might attach to them and we must 'know' some things that can attach to them for ourselves, for our purposes). Specific memories can't be read off them. A viewer might bring his or her own memories—of migration etcetera—and, in that sense, find the planks resonant. They won't find any prior imbueing.

An introductory space led into the larger part of the exhibition and it attempted to set up some of this colouring of the material. There were a number of interesting and moving accounts of the emigrating experience of loss and the immigrant's

experience of deprivation and difficulty, and of incremental victories won through hard work and persistence. *Other voices* featured also a prefatory wall filled with three or four large doodles—from memory. representing a dog, a child's tricycle, a bird—and these were made out of the fold-out (articulated) yellow rulers builders used use, often folded into a back pocket. This was both witty and charming in calling up the context in which builders often worked and a sense of the past.

The accounts of migration were interesting in their own right. One might decide for or against using them or might wonder how strongly to do so: more or less discreetly? One disadvantage of this preparatory work is that the viewer doesn't have a chance to come upon the installation with only their own experience: the ante-room has given us some handy memories to take in instead—good, clear ones, picturesque, sharper, more fully formed than your own. Sentiment was always legitimately going to be a part of the work, but this tactic seemed to me appeal a little too hard, to orchestrate and limitingly determine the exhibition's reception. This helped the viewer, and coached the viewer, made the illustration a little more illustrative than evocative, less confronting and more mediated. If these (the proffered stories) were its meaning then we quickly came to the end of it—more quickly than if it had been an open-ended installation-experience. Did the artist fluff a very good work—or did he produce a good work, not seeing that a better work was within reach? I don't think it was the latter.

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Pat Brassington's exhibition at Greenaway (September 19th—October 21st) was apparently, according to 'the gallerist', her first solo show in Adelaide. Can it be so? And it was also something of a small retrospective. This last seemed unlikely to me—or at any rate a surprise to me—because the works' formats and colour-schemes varied so little: warm sepia, silvery grey, and pink, for two or

three decades? Not the case: the works dated from 2005 to 2010, with two from 2003. One decade.

The images and their framing often offer very pleasingly formal, abstract arrangements and the image's abridgement by the picture's edge sometimes plays pleasingly on our curiosity as to what exactly is missing. Perhaps not so much on our curiosity as on a kind of empathy: a long graceful limb whose end and further tapering away is implied by the picture and its truncation—in conjunction with an interestingly weighted asymmetry, say—can leave the 'eye', the 'body' (?), missing that promised, implied, withheld completion.

Many of Brassington's photos seem to settle for the now very muted shock value of a Max Ernst-style collage of 'unsettling' elements: female beauty plus octopus—or impossible orientation in space—a figure reeling at an impossible but, for-a-second-plausible, angle: the top half of a torso facing the opposite way to the bottom half. Not very 'convulsive'—if we're talking still about Surrealism—more cool, gently playful, with enchantingly graceful symmetries and asymmetries and cool, low-vibed colour schemes.

The works cultivate successfully a very restrained and casual feel to them. Many have the quality of old, old Kodak snaps: slightly overexposed, slightly blurred, the setting a suburban backyard perhaps or lounge room. Brassington's strength lies partly in her ability to home in on contrasts of texture (the smooth whiteness of skin against carpet or satin—note, here, the slightly Man-Ray, almost solarised outlines the lighting lends to limbs), and her canny compositional sense that can look playfully contrived or casual and accidental. The work regularly has an air of mild, mild mystery. The best are surprising, but not clamorous. They can deal in the 'daggy' without begging our complicity; they are detached. I liked the work. It was not a big exhibition but could have been smaller.

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Acceptably like art

Katie Barber showed at FELT space (*Perceivable (painted) Objects*— October 3rd—October 20th) and the work was a fairly cohesive environment playing on tensions it set up as to whether it was (to be taken as) sculpture, installation, painting, immersive environment. The tension was probably the crucial attainment and the work generated it successfully. These same shapes were presaged in her Odradek showing a few months earlier. *Perceivable (painted) Objects'* floor was a large composite painting—the same serviceable, cloudy and amorphous lyricism as I think I recall from that painted, framed narrow Odradek object. Around parts of FELT's back-room walls identically framed shapes were mounted: long thin ones that ran up the wall and then a little across the ceiling, shapes that ran horizontally (as pictures are wont to do) around the walls, but which ran right to the corner and turned with it to extend into the space or field of the adjoining wall. (Was the wall a field and did the sculptural element encroach interestingly across it?) This meant that there was some insistence on the room as single space over against the wall as mere invisible support for a (traditional) painting. The floor? Yes—were we walking on art? Was it to be peered at as “significant form” (Clive Bell, so long since we've heard from you!), walk on it as carpet, or feel we were embarked into an eerily, or dreamily, visual 'space'—a happening, man, an environment? Where the same cloudy floral imagery wasn't used some of the frames were, instead, empty and relied on convention to have their frames effectively cite their empty innards (white, painted wall) as their content, as a field to be scrutinised. The convention has enough charge left to do this, though no longer very disconcertingly. (One might have imagined a weird cross-breeding of Helen Frankenthaler and Daniel Buren?) The installation worked. Barber's problem—and it defeats many of her peers—is the much-

reduced shock value of these supposed conundrums. Art has been so regularly to this well. Can another visit sustain a work of art? Can the territory require any further exploration or investigation? Her work here seems like acceptable art, and it seems so through quoting moves that have in the past (and possibly would still) aim to claim an advance beyond established territory and beyond acceptability.

Sam Howie's *Apainting* seemed the repetition of a more thoroughly inert ploy—a gallery-filling pile, dead centre, of sticks of polystyrene plastic, resembling, a little, an ice-floe. It looked tiredly anarchic. Or would-be anarchic. Why? Is it part of an array of uses of industrial waste material that his works are exploring? I expect it was a desperate attempt to fill a gallery space the artist had not had time to produce work for. So, a wasted opportunity and, casually, one in the eye for the art-punter who bothers to show up. Though bafflingly bad art is itself something of a convention these days. So all is forgiven. Howie has been interesting in the very recent past.

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Interstellar pie?

Matt Bradley's *Space Chickens help me bake Apple pie* (Fontanelle, September 23rd—October 28th) was a pleasant installation-and-(relaxed)-performance work whose purpose was to posit a constellation of metaphors for consideration or contemplation. What Bradley showed was a scale model (about 3 or four feet high) of a building—a nineteenth-century astronomical observatory (dome, covering for the aperture that, notionally, opens to admit the giant telescope)—and attached to it what would probably be the administrative and research end—a rectangular neoclassical building. So the target associations are those that collect around (The Age Of) Reason, and Science, Rationalism, Knowledge,

Scholarship, Humanism even. There was also a long table for the preparation and setting out of apple pie, which was served to any and all every day at three PM. And some monitors showing footage of chickens, chooks, on the move. Crucially, and as is usual with Bradley's work, the model building was both extremely well made and highly detailed: small downpipes in the corners, some modern security camera mountings, properly detailed window frames, guttering under the eaves. All of these were convincing, or entertaining in their care and seeming verisimilitude. ("Seeming" because the model is not based on any specific building in fact.)

What the monitors show—a little disconcertingly maybe—is the hens moving about within the domed observatory—in and about the building: we see them sometimes as from within the building walking by the windows, at other times the same camera shows them wandering about inside, looking to roost. The eggs used in the pastry of the pies were all laid within the building. The light within the construction is surprisingly 'light', airy, 'enlightening' and calmly utopian. And odd—with the occasional enormous chook picking its way whitely past the camera.

Bradley has produced a number of more or less discrete sequences of work that examine different cultural forms-of-life: subcultural behaviours like illicit, prank motorbike escapades, enthusiasm for hybrid bicycles, or a look at space science: its objects of interest (moon-shots etc), its own portrayal (men in lab coats looking at the heavens, as though in 1950s movies about early jet flight or early satellite launches). Bradley has also regularly made work around the defamiliarising ascent to great height: the simple 'long view' afforded from on high. In this vein there have been his early film of climbing illicitly up towers to look at the suburb surrounding him, and a film made while flying in a hired plane around Adelaide at night. The model building at the centre of *Space Chickens*

gives each visitor this same (god-like) perspective on the proposed human institution of the observatory and its traditions of science and learning.

The hens are proposed, I suppose, as substitutes for us, or as functioning like us. Egg production for them, knowledge production for us? It is not clear and probably in the artist's view doesn't need to be.

Bradley has also produced works that seemed pseudo-relics of a distant future's past: huge fragments (of still larger, imagined machinery) that seem late 19th-century in their massiveness and weight and yet also futuristic. We travel to a future perspective—a Jurassic future—and look back... on where present folly will lead? Planet-of-the-Apes stuff.

Does the work propose some simple and usefully deflationary view of human activity? Does it propose some recognition of ourselves as—in a hen-like way—a little blinkered or limited? We should live with it? We should rise above it? *Space Chickens* was a work that made, I think, no firm proposals but nudged the viewer in the direction of themes to consider.

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Mark Valenzuela (at Nexus, September 27th—October 26th) produced a small but cohesive exhibition, *Entry*, on themes of arrival in a strange land: immigration, yes, but here focusing on anticipation of arrival and of the new, and anxiety about it and about what is being left behind. Valenzuela tended to show massed and grouped repetitions of single forms, some ceramic, some carved. There were birds' heads for example. The objects suggested instinct, flight, panic, violence, mere will to survive. But none of this strained after effects of weight, of major chords being solemnly or portentously struck. One work, for example, was a play on the idea of northern and southern hemisphere basins draining in different

directions, clockwise or counter-clockwise. Other pieces suggested the solidarity of the pack, the support of it and the aggression it might mete out. 'Flight' in these works signaled both the sense of fleeing and of migrating, of taking off and of arriving. The work was well made and well-installed and highly refined.

Jeffrey Harris—*My Father's Table* (Light Square Gallery, October 10th — November 1st)—was something of a delight and unexpected. Harris is a very senior painter (now 80 or so) and his work reprises a lot of looks and territory from art of the 50s and 60s through to the more or less recent past. This particular show was heavily weighted towards Harris's memories of his own father, a tailor, and of the patterns, cut shapes and the tools surrounding them, that all occupied his father's work bench in the Harris home. The figurative works reminded of John Brack—of the phase around the warring pencils theme, but in fact far more varied than those particular works of Brack's. (They were not my favourite Brack works. In fact, Brack's oeuvre strikes me as a rather circumscribed one: the hits are terrific, but they are rare summits within a body of work that is to some degree dry, dour, sour, seems to struggle to find variety or escape, and is always concerned to 'nail it' in a slightly totalising, summative way.) Harris's desk-top scenes were less sclerotic and more playful.

The same shapes—patterned cuttings of material for vests or lining, jacket-shapes etc—would seem to have also inspired many of the abstracts and semi-abstracts. These recalled—to me—Hoyland and other UK abstractionists, locals like Leonard French, early 80s Leach-Jones, even. (Jeff Harris was born and trained in the UK and in late mid-century worked for a time in the St Ives/Cornwall area. He has had a long teaching career in Australia.) The abstracts were high-coloured, very sure, cheerfully decorative. And they did seem to fix on, be generated out of, pattern and bold shape or silhouette. They could be characterised as lyrical, but they were probably almost 'workmanlike', forthright in their inception—licensed by thoughts of the father's example. Not that one is to

know this. They were admirable. The show spanned 2006—2012. Very likely the paintings reflect the themes thrown up by memories of his father's creativeness and are not entirely representative of Harris's work overall. In any case the work was attractive and Harris is 'on song' at the moment.