Erratic Art #3, Long Gallery, University of Wollongong

This is the third in a series of exhibitions exploring the theme of errata and features the work of artists with a connection to Wollongong University’s Faculty of Creative Arts. The works draw inspiration from the margins, the under-explored and the frailties implicit in a flawless environment. Taking their cue from the Latin errāre, they invite us to wander amongst quotidian preoccupations with light, form and mood, roam through vast abstract land- and dreamscape, and be lead astray by irreverent representations of the human form. Also on offer is a bittersweet exploration of collective memory, recalled both in frames per second and in the objects and artefacts that document our lives.

Capturing immediate attention are two complementary displays of objects collected, and exquisitely arranged, by Jelle van den Berg. “Wood’s Good”, a carefully curated collection of exclusively wooden objects, both found and hand crafted, sits opposite “Raku Still Life”, an intriguing collection of vessels, from the purely decorative to the banally functional.

The wooden objects include simple carved bowls and plates, musical instruments, primitive weapons and good luck charms – the miscellany of human civilisation - alongside found pieces that have been weathered by the elements into sublime sculptural forms. By giving the “raw materials” equal status with the “product”, each object’s form, whether crafted by the elements, or human hand, is transcended by the grain, texture and complexity of its material.

The vessels, on the other hand, are all about form. Cases, buckets, bottles, pots, vases, atomisers, watering cans, pouring jugs, incense holders, boxes, oil burners, teapots – each vessel, designed for a highly specific function, could be a small memento of the complexity of human social interaction. The variety of forms on display prompts inquiry about each vessel’s unseen or “missing” contents, in turn evoking memories of the familiar rituals that accompany the use of that object. A sweet little teapot constructed entirely of lace is a triumph of decoration over function, but also raises an interesting question – to what extent can all things be ‘contained’? The inclusion of a camera and a framed photograph of a child’s birthday cake in the collection (each, literally, a container for film, and a container for photographs respectively) take up this theme – are our memories really capable of being “contained” on film? What do we compromise in the process of “containment”? The quaint charm of this collection belies the obvious political resonance of such questions.

Diana Wood Conroy’s work “14 weeks in 2006, with errata” also provides a reflective take on the everyday by allowing us to share excerpts from her personal visual diary. Tens of watercolours, each of the same dimension, are hung edge to edge, and effectively map Conroy’s life over this period in sunrises, sunsets, moonrises, storms, studies of birds, trees and landscapes, and a selection of studies of Athenian forms. Each tenderly executed work discloses the artist’s preoccupation with light, form and mood during the period in question. Taken together, the works constitute a fascinating, deliciously voyeuristic insight into her investigations into what she terms the “chance conjunction of paper, water, atmosphere and emotion”.

Paul Gilsenan’s large, colourful canvasses and works on paper similarly reflect chance conjunctions: in his case, of colour and motion. In his paintings strong vertical or horizontal strokes in bold colours form a background over which thick dobles and smears of paint are energetically applied in contrasting colours. The paintings evoke timelapse snapshots – each 3D dribble in the foreground feels like a moment made tangible, before it is inevitably subsumed into the rushing backdrop of the painting.

In “Cooler Colours” a dramatic background of vertical brushstrokes in green, blue, white and black is overlaid with slashes of thick, red and black acrylics and recalls rainy childhood car trips, one’s nose pushed to the window, whilst blinking rapidly to capture even for a split second a freeze-frame of the landscape whizzing past. Gilsenan’s works on paper – pastel and acrylic works taken from the series “Heads” – are equally lively, revealing a keen sense of romantic whimsy.
Both canvasses and works on paper are strong and celebratory, definitively rejecting any sense of regret for the moment passed.

Not so Robert Howe’s bittersweet portraits of bygone events and personalities. As in Gilsenan’s and Wood Conroy’s works, Howe’s paintings seek to suspend time. However, Howe’s paintings are less about the elation of “the moment” (as in Gilsenan’s work) or the deep insight borne of repeated daily observation (as in Wood Conroy’s work), than a searching reexamination of episodes in our political and cultural history. “The Zapruder Tapes #1 – 5” interprets the Kennedy assassination using shadowy, abstracted forms, and murky colours. The series constitutes a stilted, frame by frame narrative of the final moments of Kennedy’s life, each painting zooming to a different level of abstraction, thereby recalling the jagged retelling of a violent event by a traumatised witness. In his jarring choice of palette (sick green-blues, yellow-greens, black, red and white) and menacing abstraction Howe successfully channels a disturbance in our collective memory of this incident, pointing up latent anxieties in contemporary society about the sanctity of the democratic ideal and the inability of charismatic political leaders to displace the sense of despair and disenfranchisement that fuels acts of terror.

Jelle van den Berg’s landscapes resume the conversation about colour and reduction commenced in the inaugural Erratic Art outing (in which he and Simon Blau were the sole exhibitors). Van den Berg’s small, neat and dense paintings are controlled investigations into these themes. Thick slathers of paint in multiple layers provoke tinges in the fingertips as one imagines the physical sensation of touching each painting’s innate text. Does each layer of paint serve to reveal or conceal that text? The artist’s playful challenge prompts a search for clues and private jokes (or are they red herrings?) within each work. The central motif of one half of van den Berg’s object display, the vessel, is lovingly reprised in “Raku”. In this lovely work, a handle-less teacup, or perhaps soup bowl, takes on monumental, mythic status, dramatically rendered in opaque solidity against a thickly applied pinkish-white background.

Taking a step through the looking glass, Jason Howe’s works feature landscapes of a different kind. Howe uses a varied, colourful palette in his paintings, drawings and collages to reveal richly imagined worlds populated by soft, gooey forms, floating bubbles and melting blobs, luxuriant plant life and cute, insect-like critters (or possibly extra-terrestrial beings). “Twin Falls” a floating blue-green cloud slowly reveals a labyrinthine form rendered in tight, careful brushstrokes. The eye is lead through infinite twists and turns, each promising a pathway to an alternative dimension that is always just out of reach. By blurring the distinction between what is “the earth” and what is “of the earth” (is that vaguely sexualised, amorphous blob a “creature” or part of “the landscape”?) Howe’s work draws on the ancient cycles of growth and decay. In the complex patterns, pathways and puzzles of life Howe finds a joyous sense of interconnectedness.

Whilst Jason Howe’s work imagines an alternative reality, Simon Blau’s work seeks a direct engagement with the tragi-comedy of the human condition. In a series of black and white collage-paintings, Blau takes classic photographic representations of aspects of the human form and paints in the balance of the composition in loose, sprawling brushstrokes.

In each case the effect is a perfectly composed distortion, exaggeration or recontextualisation of the original subject of the photograph. In “[Primal]” a row of tiny, seated naked men (taken from a photograph) appear to be cheering on a statue composed of a photographic image of a classically beautiful male head to which is attached an incongruously large and naive body, painted in the style of a paper cut out. Linking the two images is a photographic image of a group of discrete characters who appear to be engaged in a theatrically lit outdoor ritual. The narrative thus created recalls early art forms in its dramatic signalling of impending apocalypse. Is each human subject the source of order over the external surrounds? Or is the external drama gradually subsuming the human subject? Blau’s subversion of traditional representations of the human form encourages good humoured scepticism of the often tendentious nature of such representations.
Robyn Douglass has chosen three works from 1994: “Treading Water”, ‘Water Views” and “Out of Water”. The subtle studies in watercolour make references to various states of being connected to water, both in terms of medium and subject-matter. This gently humorous approach to the observation of still lives of water creatures and the observed slow motion of a pair of legs of a bather in a pool propose suggestions of leisure and the lingering qualities of summer swims and lunches.

This latest show by Sydney and Wollongong’s erratic art gang is a multilayered treat that rewards repeat visits.

Erratic Art #3 is on display at the Long Gallery, Faculty of Creative Arts, University of Wollongong until [9th March 2007].

_Megan West, Wollongong_