

# Alexander Seton. *Panoply*.

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CHALKHORSE

*Who can hide in secret places so that I cannot see them?  
Do I not fill heaven and earth?*

Jeremiah 23:24

During APEC, our own city was walled, we were threatened by CBD snipers and told there was no place to hide. Following on from his last project *Security Blanket* (shown at Jan Murphy in Brisbane in 2007) *Panoply* continues Alexander Seton's interest in spectacles of state power, surveillance and control. Central to both collections is the assertion that there is a dangerous acceptance and lack of critique within our current democratic system.

Seton has earned a reputation for detailed and realistic recreations of popular commodities, such as leather bags, couches, boots, doonas, money sacks and other objects, but ossified. His work shows influences of the Super-realist sculptors of the seventies, such as Duane Hanson, John de Andrea and, in particular, the woodcarvings of Fumio Yoshimura. The power of all the work is transformation, where Seton, like the White Witch, turns flesh into marble. As in a spell, there is a haunting suspicion that at any moment life will return.

Part Minimalist, part Photo-realist, Seton continues art's interest in the everyday, the industrial and the machined. Like a scientist, he patiently clones things. Unlike, however, the coolly detached Super-realists, Seton's work is politically and socially engaged in a very contemporary way – in his work our cynicism is brought to account. In *Barriers*, this project is clear. Every word of the inlaid inscription, *Proceed/About/Your/Normal/Routine*, implies Foucault's notion of bio-power. The State controls us through our own bodies, surveilled and surveilling others, based on the binary normal/deviant. *Barriers* explicitly suggests the inside and the outside, us and them, the secured zone and the unsecured. But by focusing on the barrier or the wall itself, Seton is expressing something else about a post-terror, post-historical world; a world where there is no clear enemy.

To go back to a simpler politics, in contrast, Hans Haake, in his work *Oelgemaelde, Hommage a Marcel Broodthaers* (1982), placed on one side of the room an oil portrait of Reagan (gold framed and behind silk rope) facing off, on the other side of the room, a photograph of anti-war, anti-Reagan, German protesters.<sup>1</sup> The work set up a strong binary of authoritarian democracy separated from the truth (the popular movement). In the early eighties, though, there was still a feeling that protests mattered. In late August 2004 Bush was asked about the 500,000 protesters outside the Republican National Convention, in Madison Square Garden. His reply to their claims over Iraq was "Isn't democracy swell?" There is no transgression in post-ideological democracy because it and cynicism are already built in. As soon as the latest political issue is named, a trendy youth label has sold the T-shirt.

*Barriers* is a metaphor for the lack of an outside. Both political sides find themselves together on the wall. As Zizek suggests, if ideology now incites and accounts for its own transgression the only effective resistance is 'to simply do what is allowed.'<sup>2</sup> By doing this Zizek shows that you refuse the game of ideology that asks to be transgressed. Full identification, to the letter of the law, undermines power through over-proximity. *Barriers* highlights the heavy handedness, the totalitarian over tones of police power by merely (re)presenting the barricade. It is not a program for revolution as no attack on ideology can be successful; the only thing available is to personally (artistically?) frame the (national) fantasy. *Panoply* is Seton's own attempt to show, without cynicism, an alternative reading of government, or as Lacan calls it 'traversing the fantasy.' In *Please Do Not Lick The Artwork* and *Invitation* the possibility of this playing with the political is reasserted. The answer to the APEC barriers is to treat them like toffee apples, or to imagine them as children's (or Minimalist) building blocks, to be placed in whatever way YOU choose.

*Standing Manikin Target (SMT)* also highlights the limits of the discourse of 'us and them'. It is a replica of an army dummy used for shooting practice, an enemy who is both the everyman and faceless. Aesthetically pleasing, it resembles a lost Brancusi or an Egyptian sarcophagus but the simplified lines belie the robotics that, in the original, lie under a plastic skin. A computer registers hits, and the arms are truncated because it is not a good shot if you hit a shoulder. The truth suggested by *SMT* is provocative. How does Seton have access to restricted army ordinance? That he has means he must be a terrorist (or artist).

These works want to stir up micro-revolts and turn us all into outlaws. Perhaps in retrospect the array of commodity objects, from past shows, have all lead to this point. Seton asks have all these products merely separated people from real political and historical issues. It is well to remember that even Claes Oldenburg's Pop, huge, moving scissors were meant to replace (castrate) the Washington Obelisk and were not benign. If Seton has proved anything it is that within the walls of the gallery, in this show, a critique of power was possible. It is a rhetoric of sameness and literalness. These works challenge the state with its ethical and aestheticised self, threatening power with its own lack. They are Doppelgangers.

<sup>1</sup> See Douglas Crimp, "The Art of Exhibition," in *October: The First Decade*, MIT: 1987, pp 223-255, for a discussion of this work and plates.

<sup>2</sup> Slavoj Zizek, *The Fragile Absolute: Or, Why is the Christian Legacy Worth Fighting For?* Verso, 2000, p

