

Stay On Message

Alexander Seton

Maunsell Wickes @ Barry Stern Galleries, Paddington, Sydney 8 to 26 November 2005.

The title of Alex Seton's new exhibition contains within itself a certain paradox which lies at the heart of his art making. At first glance, *Stay on message* seems to imply a directive to keep to the truth, but on further reflection, it also seems to negate the possibility of an alternative point of view and ultimately it points to the antithesis of truth and the affirmation of the mentality that if you are not with us, you must be against us. All of the works in this exhibition conceptually explore this sense of duality and each contains within itself something that contradicts its own nature.

At 28 Seton is a young artist, one who is fascinated by the world and by his responses to it. His art is informed by an intellectual and emotional curiosity and he is anchored within his own generation with its doubts and affirmations. He is challenged by the materials and processes of sculpture and his ambitions are romantic and boundless when he declares "I want to take sculpture to a place where I have not seen it go before". Yet there is something about his sculpture that is intriguing and enigmatic. A certain deceptive transparency of means and virtuosity in technique conceals a conceptual ambiguity frequently laced with a generous dose of whimsical wit.

A major piece at the exhibition is titled *The razor* where a still life arrangement with bathroom tiles, discarded lingerie and pools of liquid has been immaculately carved out of marble. This is offset with an actual steel razor blade shown as if discarded carelessly on this carved bathroom floor. There is something of a challenge of disbelief, you want to reach out and touch the surfaces and their fragile and temporal qualities to be assured of their physical existence. The whole is presented like a crime scene snapshot, but one preserved in cold sensuous marble. It begs a narrative – is this the record of a suicide or the trails of a drug overdose? We are provided with random clues, but the narrative is not prescriptive, it is open ended. The physical presence of the sculpture starts to negate the object as the whole reading of it dissolves into a series of paradoxes. The carving of the marble is obsessively and painstakingly exacting, yet the razor blade appears as a discordant and almost arbitrary note which seems to subvert the process. Deliberate intention and chance collide against the background of one of the most traditional mediums in art – carved marble.

In *Blue Electric Eagle Day*, the reference is to the date of the bombing of Hiroshima. Here we are presented with an exquisitely carved food tray with the remnants of a sushi meal including traces of Soya sauce and scattered grains of rice, all lovingly carved out of precious marbles. As in *The razor*, the first reaction is a reality check, the desire to confirm that someone has forced marble to behave in such an unorthodox manner and it is within this process of examination that there is the unexpected revelation that we are dealing with objects that have been warped by incredible heat. We have in fact encountered a memento mori – a still life commemorating a deliberately orchestrated catastrophe. Like the petrified human remains found in Pompeii, this sushi tray is an object pregnant with a whole raft of ambiguous associations and open-ended narratives.

Alex Seton, as an artist, hides behind the illusionist tableau which he has created and avoids showing his hand. Even in his more quirky creations like the immaculately carved, but totally functionless, USB stones and robotic explorers, the play is with a duality of meanings and the

challenge of duality in the creation of the work. The frame of reference is to new technologies, early sci-fi and popular classics such as Doctor Who, but all subverted through the sculptural process. In photographic stills we are invited to follow the melancholy loveable robots who appear curiously alienated in a grungy urban environment.

For an artist having only his third solo exhibition it is too early to attempt any assessment of his standing as a sculptor, but he has certainly acquired many of the essential technical skills and has the intellectual curiosity to suggest that he is in for the long haul. At a time when so much contemporary sculpture appears weighed down with ideological baggage, Alex Seton's work is fresh and vital and conveys the joy of the sculptural process. His sculptures are tactile physical objects, but in the final analysis they are not about technical virtuosity or the making of precious aesthetic objects, but about conveying ideas.

Sasha Grishin

Australian National University

Notes:

1. Alex Seton, taped interview with the author, Newtown studio, 22nd October 2005.
2. The bombing of Hiroshima occurred on 6th August 1945 (Gregorian calendar) which occurs on the day of The Blue Electric Eagle in the Dreamspell Calendar.