

Keeping the human herd at bay

ART

Melbourne galleries:

Scott Redford: Painting as Phenomena
Australian Centre for Contemporary Art

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WHILE taking a nostalgic trip through the densely theoretical pages of *Die Reihe* (circa 1955-62), a periodical devoted to analysing the music of the post-Webern generation, I came across these words by Claude Debussy: "Music must be a secret science, protected by writings so tiresome and difficult to interpret that they discourage the whole herd of people who would like to make use of music as nonchalantly as if it were a handkerchief."

Although quoted because it presented an expression parallel to "a wish also cherished by young present-day composers" (such as Boulez, Stockhausen and Nono), Debussy's statement could easily apply to a situation many people encounter when visiting exhibitions of idea-based art. These days, it is not unusual for an artist's work to be supported by not one but two or more catalogue essays. That the work might better deserve to be treated as something to blow one's nose on does not seem to concern the authors of these, at times, over-solemn writings.

Scott Redford's *Painting as Phenomena* at the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art is the sort of exhibition one expects to be accompanied by at least three tiresome texts by writers with hyphenated names. Fortunately, the ACCA have settled for one short essay by Bronwyn Clark-Coolee, which makes its points clearly and without tedium.

Redford is a Queensland artist whose work has previously been seen in group shows. In this, his first solo exhibition in Melbourne, he is represented by one large floor piece that can be viewed with deliberate difficulty in the semi-darkness of the main gallery. The work consists of two long rows of panels — one strewn with assorted books (and video cassette cases?) and clusters of hammers and axes, the other featuring more orderly arrangements of shovels.

Both the objects and the surface to which they are attached have been given a unifying coat of black enamel.

In a box of odds and ends from the early 1970s, I recently found a copy of Dale Hickey's *Calling a Spade a Spade*. In this little-known work, the actual object (or a painting of it) has been replaced by typed sheets of dictionary definitions of a spade. Redford, on the other hand, who probably sees recent painting in terms of a succession of end-games, has not sought to de-materialise the object.

Instead, his shovels and other tools make their presence felt but are at the same time stripped of their original identity and function, while the books defy all attempts to uncover their contents. As Clark-Coolee observes: "Glossed over and seemingly emptied of meaning, the conglomerate surface draws associations and evokes memories."

It would appear that one function of Redford's floor piece is to keep "the whole herd of people" at bay. While examining it in some detail, I observed that the few visitors who ventured into the darkened space were inclined to give the work a quick once-around before escaping into the sunlight. As there is more here than meets the eye, I should perhaps say something about the artist and his work.

Redford has said that "popular culture and high culture are the two things I trust most". His own statements, like those of other artists today, consist of quotes. These can range from the notes

on a Roxy Music album or an Elvis Costello song lyric to artists' writings. Such statements can offer an oblique or open clue to a work's meaning, or encourage free associations. For instance, one knows the rock music connection: one can recognise in the conjunction of a bunch of axes and an electric guitar in another floor piece, a play on the word "axe" meaning a guitar. (Certified "head bangers" will, of course, know about customised guitars shaped like axes.)

On the cover of the ACCA catalogue is a black-and-white photo of Gold Coast City, which is proclaimed in the artist's biography as his birthplace and hometown. In light of the incessant blackness in Redford's paintings, one cannot fail to see the irony of this image of sunshine, opulence and emptiness. What made me like his work even more, however, was his statement: "I am a regional artist — regional within Australia as well as being regional as an Australian in the World." Now, there's an artist who knows his place.

Think of tools and objects attached to the surfaces of paintings and the American artist Jim Dine will surely come to mind. Older Australian artists liked to pretend that their work "just grew" like Topsy, but Redford openly acknowledges Dine's *Black Tools in a Landscape* (1962) as the main precedent for his early floor pieces. But Dine, "the most painterly of Pop artists", is also linked to Rauschenberg and Johns and, ultimately, to Redford's favourite period, that of the American Abstract Expressionists.

Robert Smithson once said he was interested in "a kind of iconic imagery that I felt was lurking or buried under a lot of abstractions" — Pollock's, for example. In Redford's floor piece, the shovel is used both as an emptied iconic image and a tool for unearthing more. It seems that Abstract Expressionism is alive and well and living on the Gold Coast.