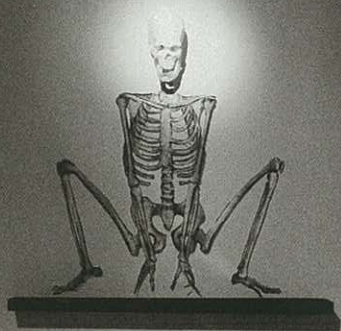


Australian Centre for Contemporary Art

SO YOU SHALL REAP

Ken Unsworth





Night Whippers 1983

Ken Unsworth DEATH IN THE GARDENS

Over the last thirty years Ken Unsworth's practice has made existential explorations of the poetic and political self, visualising with dark insight humanity's deepest dreams, fears and desires. This current exhibition of installation, sculpture, painting and drawing represents new work in the context of work from the early 1980s to the present. The themes and concerns which preoccupied Unsworth's contribution to the 1984 exhibition of Australian art in New York¹, represented here with *The Mirror and other Fables*, can be traced to the large outdoor sculptures of

the early 1970s and performance works of the later 70s.² Countering an intense and often black introspectivity with an empathic sensitivity to individual and socio-political issues, Unsworth continues to return to themes of vulnerability and mortality, revealed in this exhibition in visual dramas about chance and bravado, death and decay. Chronologically linking the artist's narrative is the recurrent use of materials from nature in vivid depictions of the Australian landscape as a site of memory, menace and metaphor.

Located in the gardens of the Domain

and adjacent to Melbourne's picturesque Botanic Gardens, the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art attracts an audience whose interest lies more with cultural than with natural phenomena, an audience appreciative of the leafy stroll into the gallery but one that doesn't necessarily stop to ponder the links between building and site. The current exhibition, provocatively titled *So you shall reap*, is centered around a new installation, *New Music*, comprising a piano and organic material, a work that differs in conception from earlier pieces in its site-specificity. Though originally conceived some years ago without reference to a particular venue, its ultimate realisation at ACCA has been influenced and informed by the immediate natural environment of the gardens.

The brushwood, dead branches, twigs and leaves which Unsworth has stacked from the piano to the ceiling were diligently collected from outside the gallery by the gardeners who regularly tend the grounds. The nature/culture dichotomy of this ambitious sculptural installation refers to the existence of an often invisible cyclic continuum beyond art's ivory tower. On a broader level and in keeping with the ongoing concerns of the artist's work (which, as the exhibition demonstrates can be static, time-based, permanent, ephemeral or, more often, a combination of these), it is this very co-habitation of life and death, the psychologically fraught and

oppressive presence of our own mortality, that imbues Unsworth's work with haunting and universal resonance.

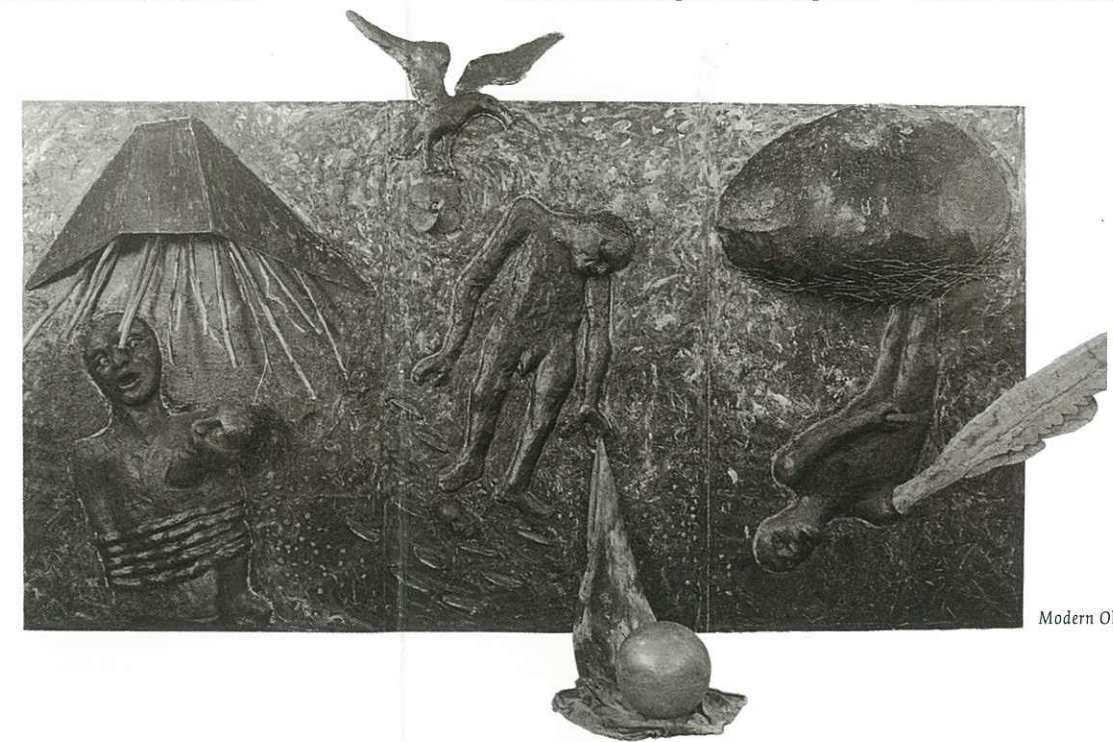
Themes of death and regeneration are central to the artist's commentary on the confluence of nature and culture implied in *New Music* by the gesture of bringing the outside in. While critically examining the naturalness of manicured city gardens – the trees of Melbourne's Domain gardens are not exclusively native and the collection of their withering winter shedding is the project of a city council seeking to present a tidy micro-ecology of spectacle and display – the work throws into doubt the authenticity of the natural setting visible beyond the exhibition space, metaph-

orically transgressing the architectural and perceptual boundaries that traditionally separate nature from culture.

New Music has been on the artist's extensive wish-list of sketches for installation projects for over a decade, as numerous sketches from the late 1980s attest. Though maintaining an interest and respect for the work of Anselm Kiefer, Unsworth has never met his German contemporary, so it was by coincidence that Kiefer constructed at New York's Marian Goodman Gallery in 1993 an installation which resembled a funeral pyre awaiting ignition, with paintings and straw stacked from floor to ceiling in a cathartic gesture

of redemption. In their use of natural materials, sombre earth and industrial tones, the two artists, both informed by the socio-political installation and performance activities of Joseph Beuys, share a preoccupation with the co-existence of life and death in relation to their respective cultural histories.

While the juxtaposition of cultural icons and natural elements in Unsworth's work is intellectually informed by a European cultural heritage, specifically the dark romanticism of German art and literature, it characteristically reflects the specifics of the Australian culture and environment. Seminal works by Unsworth using river stones to create a foreboding tension



Modern Oblivion 1984

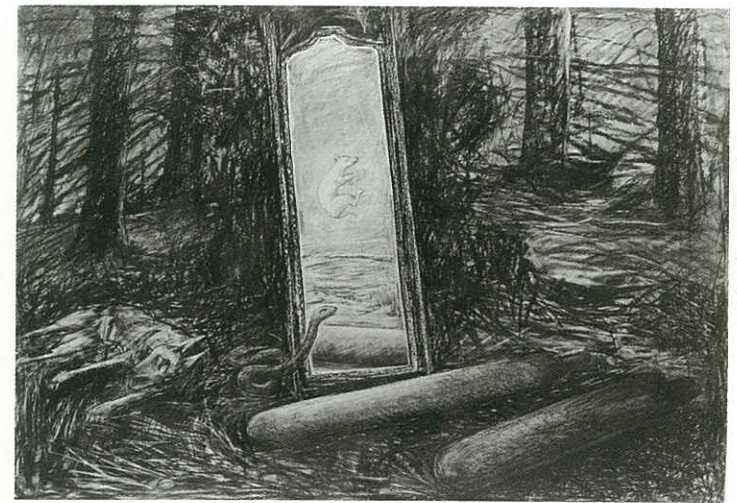
between suspension and gravity, together with installations that use elevated pianos either sprouting or supporting natural materials, make ominous reference to the precarious balance of economic and ecological needs, an issue society is addressing with end-of-millennium urgency as the earth's resources reach breaking point.

The regional content of his work is found in Unsworth's visual vocabulary: while *New Music* bears a specific reference to its immediate locality, the large bitumen drawings of *The Mirror and other Fables* series depict black figures that are both literal representations of indigenous Australians and metaphorical evocations of the psyche. The series documents the love/hate relationship with the land first described in Australian art by Boyd, Nolan and Drysdale in their most memorable works of the 1950s. Unsworth's dark paintings are macabre and melancholic visions, imaging the Australian landscape as a desolate site of harsh physical and eerie phantasmagorical phenomena. With their textured tones of russet browns and bitumen blacks, these ambivalent scenes of natural and supernatural interaction juxtapose aspects of horror and the sublime. It is a dreamlike world that Unsworth conjures, some of the paintings being nostalgic in their stories of love and loss, others horrific in their descriptions of violence and displacement.³

A Melbourne audience might appreciate the local topicality of *End-Game*, which, a decade after its first installation in Berlin, bears ironic reference to Melbourne's controversial casino culture. With its literary reference to Beckett and tongue-in-cheek visual description of the living dead in the form of athletic skeletons, *End-Game* displays the ironic, black humour which Unsworth habitually uses to make his point. Here, the vagaries and vicissitudes of life pivot on the eternally bouncing balls of the roulette wheel. The posturing skeletons, enthralled by the game's hypnotic chance of salvation, seem oblivious to their own mortal fate.

Wrap me up is a wall-mounted, semi-inflated latex chair mould. Though its sagging form is clearly devoid of life, it emanates sexual energy in the form of a sprouting phallic horn aimed directly at the precariously balanced stack of brushwood rising from the piano of the adjacent installation. Again, the presence of both energy and decay within each of these sculptural installations, as well as in the relationship between the two, eloquently describes the uneasy co-habitation of life and death in our earthly and psychological realities.

The large relief panel spilling its innards into the three dimensional gallery space is entitled *Modern Oblivion* and was constructed at the same time as *The Mirror and other Fables*, with which it shares motifs



Untitled (Drawings from germany) 1987

from Unsworth's visual lexicon of the uncompromising Australian landscape as metaphor for inner torment and tragedy. Unusual in its format for that period of the artist's career, it prefigures Unsworth's mixed media paintings of the early 1990s, which frequently encroach into the viewer's space from their two dimensional frame. In its monumental scale and despairing life-size figures, *Modern Oblivion* is Unsworth's answer to Michelangelo's *Last Judgement*, a vernacular war memorial to the despair and desolation of the silent battles that distinguish the human condition. As this exhibition reveals, it is a theme which has preoccupied the artist since, manifesting itself in a diversity of narratives and media, though always characterised by an overriding sense of locality, poetry and pathos.

Felicity Fenner

Sydney, November 1997

¹ *An Australian Accent, P.S.I.*, New York, 1984, with Mike Parr and Imants Tillers, curated by John Kaldor

² Unsworth began painting as a student in the 1950s and early 60s, though didn't exhibit until 1967 and kept almost none of his earlier work.

³ For a further discussion of landscape in Unsworth's work see Felicity Fenner, 'Chihuahuas and Currawongs: Humour and the Australian landscape in the recent work of Ken Unsworth', *Art and Australia*, vol. 33, no. 3, Autumn 1996, pp. 354-363

Felicity Fenner is Curator at the Ivan Dougherty Gallery and teaches in the School of Art History and Theory, College of Fine Arts, University of New South Wales, Sydney.

List of Works

from *The Mirror and other Fables* series:

The Temptation of Desire 1983

Feast of the Gaki 1983

Night Whispers 1983

The Spoils of Love 1983

Charon with dillybag 1983

bitumen-based and aluminium-based

paints on paper, each 203 x 152 cm

Courtesy of the artist and

Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Sydney

Evening Pastoral 1984

bitumen-based and aluminium-based paints

on paper, triptych: two panels at 183 x 102 cm,

one at 183 x 152 cm

Courtesy of the artist and

Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Sydney

The Night Visit 1984

bitumen-based and aluminium-based paints

on paper, triptych: each panel 229 x 198 cm

Courtesy of the artist and

Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Sydney

The Gaki 1 1983

bitumen-based and aluminium-based

paints on paper, 152 x 102 cm

Courtesy of the

Museum of Modern Art at Heide

The Gaki 5 1983

bitumen-based and aluminium-based

paints on paper, 102 x 152 cm

Courtesy of the artist and

Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Sydney

The Secret Journey of Ulysses 1984

bitumen-based and aluminium-based paints

on paper, triptych: 204 x 456 cm (overall)

Courtesy of the artist and

Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Sydney

Modern Oblivion 1984

mixed media, oil and metal on canvas

300 x 550 cm

Courtesy of the artist

Rape of Prometheus 1985

bitumen-based and aluminium-based paints

on paper, 203 x 152 cm

Courtesy of the artist and

Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Sydney

Untitled 1987

(from *Drawings from Germany* series)

charcoal on paper, 192 x 157 cm

Courtesy of Felicity St. John Moore,

Melbourne

Untitled 1987

(from *Drawings from Germany* series)

six drawings: charcoal on paper

one at 157 x 226 cm, five at 102 x 76 cm

Courtesy of the artist and

Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Sydney

End-Game 1987/97

installation: three skulls, drawings on paper,

roulette wheel on plinth; dimensions variable

Courtesy of the artist

New Music 1997

installation: timber construction, tree

branches, brush; dimensions variable

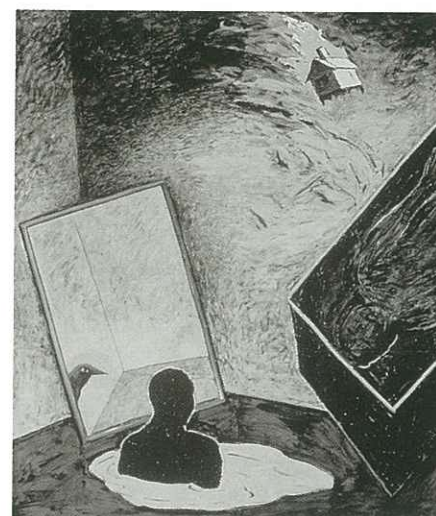
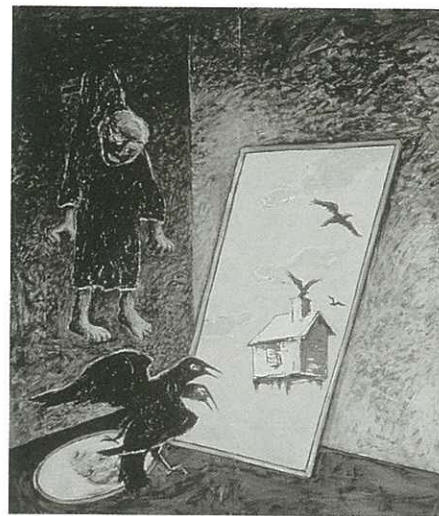
Courtesy of the artist

Wrap Me Up 1997

latex chair and metal horn,

dimensions variable

Courtesy of the artist



The Night Visit 1984

Ken Unsworth

1931 Born Melbourne, Australia

Lives and works in Sydney

Selected Individual Exhibitions

1975 *Five Secular Settings for Sculpture as Ritual and Burial Piece*, Institute of Contemporary Art, Sydney

1977 *Face to Face*, Institute of Contemporary Art, Sydney

1978 *Project 28: Ken Unsworth*, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney

1979 *Myth, Narration, Structure*, Australian Embassy, Paris

1980 *Drawings*, Kunstlerhaus Bethanien, Berlin

1982 *The Waiting Room*, Ivan Dougherty Gallery, Sydney

1983 *Sculpture Australia: Ken Unsworth*, National Art Gallery, Wellington, New Zealand

1984 *Three Recent Installations*, Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Sydney

1985 *Recent Painting and Sculpture*, Heide Park & Art Gallery, Melbourne; Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Sydney

1987 *Drawings From Germany*, Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Sydney

Temperatur, D.A.A.D. Galerie, Berlin, Germany

1988 *Flotilla*, Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Sydney; *Old Skin*, Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Sydney

1989 *Song for Henning*, Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts, Copenhagen

1991 *Self and Environment*, Galerie Lunami, Tokyo; *Litost*, City Gallery, Melbourne

Mixed Feelings, Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Sydney

1993 *Australian Rhino*, Kunst, Sydney

1994 *Everlastingness*, Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Sydney

1995 *Fly by Night*, Ruine des Kunste, Berlin

Good Thoughts, Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Sydney

Selected Group Exhibitions

1973-75 *Mildura Sculpturescape* Exhibition, Victoria

1976 *Biennale of Sydney*, Art Gallery of New South Wales (AGNSW)

1978 *Mildura Sculpturescape* Exhibition, Victoria; *Venice Biennale*, Venice

1981 *First Australian Sculpture Triennial*, Melbourne; *Australian Perspecta*, AGNSW;

Construction in Process, Lodz, Poland

1982 *Biennale of Sydney*; *Construction in Process*, Lodz, Poland

1983 *Continuum '83*, Kobayashi Gallery, Tokyo

Australia, Another Continent, The Dream and the Real, Museum of Modern Art, Paris

1984 *An Australian Accent*, P.S.1, New York; *2nd Australian Sculpture Triennial*, Melbourne

1985 *13th Paris Biennale*, Paris; *Fünf Kunstler Vom Der Funften*, D.A.A.D. Gallery, Berlin; *Zuehend Auf*

Eine Biennale, Des Friedens Kunstverein Hamburg; *Australian Perspecta*, AGNSW

1986 *Artware*, Congress Centrum Hannover; *Origins, Originality & Beyond: 6th Biennale of Sydney*

1987 *Zeitberliner*, Institut fur Kulturstauch, Stuttgart; *Emotope*, Kunsthaus, Berlin; *Australian Perspecta*

1988 *Edge to Edge*, National Museum of Art, Osaka; *Australian Bicentennial Perspecta*, AGNSW; *Balkon Mit*

Facher, Akademie Der Kunst, Berlin; *Australian Art Exhibition*, Kunstverein, Frankfurt & Stuttgart

1989 *Magiciennes De La Terre*, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris

1990 *Biennale of Sydney*; *Construction in Process*, Return to Lodz, Poland

1992 *Head Through the Wall*, Statens Museum for Kunst, Copenhagen;

Stranger in Paradise, National Museum of Contemporary Art, Seoul, Korea

1993 *Construction in Process*, Lodz, Poland; *Fifth Australian Sculpture Triennial*, Melbourne

1995 *Through a Glass Darkly*, AGNSW; *Istanbul Biennale*

1996 *Spirit and Place*, Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney

1997 *Contempora 5*, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne;

Artists in the House, Elizabeth Bay House, Sydney

Ken Unsworth: SO YOU SHALL REAP

Exhibition dates: 5 December 1997 – 12 February 1998

(ACCA closed 22 December – 12 January)

Exhibition curators: Jenepher Duncan and Clare Williamson

Catalogue published by the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art

December 1997, Edition 300, ISBN 0 947220 69 0

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Cover image: *End-Game* 1987/97

Catalogue design: Ian Robertson; Printing: Econoprint

The Australian Centre for Contemporary Art gratefully acknowledges the assistance of Ken Unsworth, Felicity Fenner, Gary Thompson at Serco Australia, Sam Cianci at Citywide Tree Services, Sarrah Preuhs, Roslyn Oxleyg Gallery and the lenders, Felicity St. John Moore and the Museum of Modern Art at Heide.

A project initiated in 1996 as part of the *Death and the Body* series

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Affiliated with Monash University

ACCA is assisted by the Commonwealth Government through the Australia Council, its arts funding and advisory body. ACCA is supported by the Victorian Government, through Arts Victoria – Department of Premier and Cabinet.

