

woolloongabba art gallery



URBANIA

works of James Watts

“The new world order of inscribed gestures and composition. Discarded and reinterpreted materials from renovation and industrial sites present dichotomies of internal/external, decay/rejuvenation, presence/absence and durability/fragility.”

James Watts - Urbania

image © James Watts

Woolloongabba Art Gallery ~ 613 Stanley Street Woolloongabba Q 4102

Wednesday to Saturday 10am - 5pm ~ Enquiries (07) 3891 5551 ~ email@wag.com.au ~ wag.com.au

James Watts - Magpie or Magician...

A magician is someone skilled in magic, a conjurer, a juggler, and here, along with that of a magpie (no not the black and white noisy bird) but a person who collects trivial objects, forms my image of James Watts, collecting and creating. Everyday rubbish and re-cycled materials are intuitively orchestrated to evoke memories of previous times, times that embody Brisbane's past.

The searching for and collecting of outcast rubbish is the source of imagination and invention, that is the core of James Watt's sculptural constructions. Watts creation of new structures evolves from objects with past histories through imagination, sensitivity and skill. This is what I often refer to as the "Watts magic"—a considered saw-blade used here and an array of bolts used there and, a bit like the Wizard of Oz's Tin Man, something is created and revealed that has not previously existed.

If you venture through Brisbane's suburbs, you may catch a glimpse of James Watts carefully scrutinising and collecting this debris as a pirate might search for and collect treasure. For Watts there is no eBay searching, only driving and looking through Brisbane and beyond, keen to discover a nuance of worn paint on a weathered skirting-board or Aunt Minnie's well-used wardrobe.

And not unlike Rauschenberg, who found wealth from the debris left on Manhattan streets, the formal qualities of both sculpture and painting are revealed through the use of recycled timber, wallpaper and sheet metal—these become the foundation for works that transcend the meaning of the quotidian into immediate associations of memory, fragility and rejuvenation—a balance between the elegant and the everyday, the social and the environmental. The assemblage works, experienced by sight and body proximity, blur what is trash and what is treasure. References to sculpture and painting are evident in the fabrication and formal qualities of the structures that examine composition, texture, colour, and spatial scale and proportion.

In asking other artists what they think of Watts' work, immediate responses were "chance", "beauty", "honesty" and "the symmetry between sculpture and painting".

The beauty of humble street-side refuse has been developed into graceful works that evoke the whispering of past joys, loves and other histories. His works have brought the everyday into the extraordinary, or as he states,

"The inscribed gestures and composition of diverse materials give tangible form to intimate experiences and memories. The scratches, cracks and marks also create an historical landscape that travel beyond the surface into a bodily interiority that transcends the physical into another time and place."

While the phenomenon of chance operates in the discovery and collection of material, it is the elements of skill, calculation and ability that collide with imagination to produce new structures, quietly stoic, yet evoking secret stories of Brisbane's past. One can almost hear the invisible histories vibrating in these works — murmurs of past turmoil and hope. Jean-François Lyotard said that "Art is the flash that rises from the embers of the everyday", and the work of James Watts is just that, but it is also the treasure created by a magician's hand and mind. So next time, when driving past another Brisbane curb-side collection, look out for James the magician, he's the one examining and collecting the discarded treasure.

Debra Porch 2011

woolloongabba art gallery



SURRENDER

works of David Nixon

"In a controlled environment, in collaboration with natural forces, the mediums of video and photography articulate the graphic fluidity of a detritus subject."

David Nixon - Surrender

image © David Nixon

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Surrender: David Nixon

This is love: to fly toward a secret sky, to cause a hundred veils to fall each moment. First to let go of life. Finally, to take a step without feet.

Rumi

“Just let go” is a fashionable pop psychology catchphrase. Yet, for something that seems so passive, surrender can sometimes be strangely difficult. It is hard to let go of what we expect to see in favour of what’s really there. Oh, but when we do! David Nixon’s work offers us an opportunity to see the beauty and wonder in everyday things, access to a quotidian sublime.

Nixon is best known as a printmaker and this exhibition features three beautiful woodcuts. All abstract, they are deeply meditative works. Their titles allude to themes in Nixon’s practice: *Aspiration, Pause and Approaching stillness*. There is something almost visceral engendered in viewing these prints, an evocation of their creation perhaps. One can imagine the artist meticulously gouging the wooden block, over and over, to create the template. Then, the repetition of mark making is echoed, fractal-like, in the repetition of printing – each iteration of the print subtly different from its block-mates. Repetition leads us inexorably towards infinity, toward the sublime, yet this is not a distant space, remote from us. Here, the hand of the artist is very apparent. It can’t not be.

Photography is another printing medium. The photographs in this exhibition are augmented stills from *Surrender* (the video work that is also displayed). Characterised principally by the elegance of their composition these images, with their striking contrast of black ground and white object hold a quiet dignity that is deepened by the visual impression of fabric that the forms convey. In one way these fabric-like images evoke painted Renaissance drapery, with all the rich connotations that that allusion contains – beauty, classicism, drama; yet in another way the ‘cloth’ becomes a purely formal element which, while still recognisable, tends to lead the viewer toward appreciating the work in a more abstract mode. A mode where we must yield up our desire for figuration to a more intuitive kind of knowing – *stepping without feet* if you like. And of course the ‘fabric’ isn’t cloth at all, but white plastic garbage bags – humble veils for the detritus of life.

There is a sense of flight in many of these photographs, a pull or movement towards some other space. Ultimately it is arrested flight. A work like *Conduit* could be smoke or vapour streaming up to the sky, but we find it suspended, perfectly poised in a black void – “fixing eternity in an instant” to quote Henri Cartier Bresson.

Flight becomes actualised in the video work *Surrender*. Assisted in its creation by Isaac Brown (behind the camera), Chris Benny and Nicola Chatham (behind the video work) here Nixon has choreographed a rhythmic field of movement. Falling, rising, diving, sweeping and floating across our field of vision the white plastic streams in *Surrender* hold a feeling of players or dancers on stage. Wheeling and turning forms render our point of location ambiguous – are we looking up and out as we would lying on our backs gazing at the clouds, or immersed in the medium, observing its tide-like flows? The uncompromising black background provides no point of reference, but here serves to highlight the negative space between: the simplicity and ordinariness of air as medium.

It is so easy to overlook the everyday, yet when we watch with an attitude of wonder then the whole world starts to reveal itself to us in an amazing freshness. *Banality Joy* is an installation piece, but the title also succinctly describes this capacity for clear seeing. Made from 192 ‘bricks’ of hand painted paper, the ‘wall’ is a lovely metaphor for the barrier between beauty and wonder being immediately accessible, not a rarefied or distant experience. The banal is familiar, boring, easy to overlook and take for granted. Actually each moment is unique, but we often assume that we already know what is there and as a result don’t really look. Like all the work in this exhibition *Banality Joy* is an exhortation to look! Surrendering to the delight of the ordinary we begin to use what’s already around us as the material for our lives, and in doing so access the vitality that flows when we just let go.