

Art Review

by Paul McGillick

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Anita Glesta is an émigré New Yorker. So, it is tempting to see her work responding to the expansiveness of the Australian urban context and perhaps enjoying a kind of liberation from the urban concentration of New York.

Certainly, since arriving in Australia, her environmental interventions have made full use of some of Sydney's generous public spaces. *Eco of Farraday Wood for Australian Perspecta 1997* was a simultaneously subtle and bold response to the increasingly cultivated and manicured Botanicals gardens. Important to its success was the way the piece—a collection of robust logs on steel frames—presented first as a tactile experience and only later as a provocation to critical reflection.

More recently, *Bath, Bird, Bed (1998)*—two rectangular concave beds of brick set into a grassy slope—exploited the expanse of Sydney Park, Sydney's answer to an English common. Referencing the history of the site as a brickworks, the piece was again a beautifully tensioned reverie about the relationship of the manufactured (the bricks) to the natural. The concave shape suggested that, at the end of the day, it is the natural which subjugates the manufactured.

But Glesta is also a painter and her recent show at the University of NSW where she was artist-in-residence not only combined painting with object-making, but set up some intriguing formal analogies between the two. In fact, what is so gratifying about Glesta's work is the textual richness, the way in which she can set a number of issues running—to do with the themes, materials and context—in counterpoint with one another. You quickly realise that there is a lot lost if you try to separate individuals from their siblings. So you eventually stand back and take the piece in as a whole—as an aesthetic experience.

If art isn't about looking, then it does not have much claim to even exist. The critical edge to Glesta's work is just part of a counterpointed whole and an inseparable part of that aesthetic experience.

A set of three paintings with central ovoid shapes was, at one level, a push-pull proposition: Do we look into the shape or is it advancing towards us?

The paintings were seductive. But most of us look forward to something more after any seduction and, in this case, that was delivered by the manner in which the paintings related to everything else in the small exhibition space. By themselves they had a lot to offer. But in their relationship to the other objects in the room they became far richer experience.

So, now you begin to see how Glesta's themes are not laid on with a trowel, but subtly layered into the experience of the work. The push-pull proposition is redeemed from being merely an arid formal gesture by being transformed into a metaphor for the idea that what is inside is only an aspect of what is outside—and vice versa.

Ambiguity and ambivalence have always been grist to art's mill—for all kinds of reasons.

One reason, though, might be to do with the fact that the way we experience life—physical, emotional and spiritual—is very much to do with constantly having to resolve ambiguities and uncertainties.

The constant reference to the surface and what happens beyond the surface, to the opposition between the tactile fact of each piece and its formal expression, not only provoked the viewer into a reflection on how we inhabit the world physically, but acted also as a reminder that under our stretched, scarred and weathered epidermis there is another world altogether—a psychic reality which is forever banging on the wall, demanding to be heard and seen.