And then...

Penny Mason

17 August - 14 September 2012
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The exhibition And then… attempts to identify key points in the trajectory of Penny Mason’s practice to show how seemingly large jumps have emerged from almost imperceptible shifts over time. Placed side by side, the earliest and the most recent works in this show are vastly different, yet the progression of work from Mason’s first exhibition at the George Paton gallery in 1977 until today suggests a more gradual change. David Sudmalis previously noted how equivalent developments in music, particularly ritualized expressions of time and space, have shaped key aspects of Mason’s work. Originally accompanying the exhibition Sets & Series (2006), Sudmalis’ catalogue essay, ‘From the first clang of the rail to the last clang of the rail’, will be reprinted for this exhibition. And then… explores this unfolding development, looking for evidence of a logical progression defined by a consistent sensibility. The exhibition questions and defines the extent to which each new development emerges from a sustained interest in the material expressiveness of process-based making.

Penny Mason

Since graduating from the Tasmanian School of Art in 1970, Penny Mason has participated in group shows and undertaken regular solo exhibitions. Recent solo exhibitions include; Sets & Series at Sidespace Hobart and Excess at the Academy Gallery, Launceston in 2006 and Vital Signs at Poimena Gallery, Launceston in 2002. She participates in an ongoing collaborative project with David Marsden and Sue Henderson under the name art3 which presented Space Antics at Burnie Regional Art Centre in 2011 and Swerve at Carnegie Gallery, Hobart in 2012.

Penny Mason is represented in public and private collections and is currently lecturer in Painting at the School of Visual and Performing Arts, University of Tasmania, Launceston.

From the first clang of the rail to the last clang of the rail

Any person familiar with the plight of Ivan Denisovich (Solzhenitsyn, 1963) will recognise the penultimate phrase of Solzhenitsyn’s serialised testimony from which this short essay takes its name. This phrase, totally demoralising in its context, compels the reader to reflection as, all at once, the totality of the character’s experience on just one day is amplified and applied to the three thousand, six hundred and fifty-three other days of his Stalinist, formalist incarceration. The way in which Solzhenitsyn describes this totality (predominantly through an investigation of minutia) has the dual capacity to slowly reveal universal experiences and expectations in strangely unfamiliar contexts whilst exploring the larger scale implications of even the smallest events and decisions. It is the battle of the micro and the macro; structuralist and deconstructionist (Gabardi, 2001); the relationship of the opposites; the combinatoriality of complements (Forte, 1973).

In Sets & Series, Penny Mason likewise considers balance through the exploration of dichotomies. From conception to completion, Mason’s works exist on several planes concurrently, with each plane undergoing subtle transformation from one state to another. This process, elsewhere described as gestural interplay (Sudmalis 2002, Brooks 1980), underpins one of Mason’s prime tenets – the conveying of movement, energy and direction within what is essentially a static form. Movement within the opus is at turns rapid and turgid, vertical and horizontal. Even the absence of movement through the work finds reflection and synthesis in movement of the spectator, as though energy and directionality suggested within the work is transformed into actual action by the spectator.

Though pure illusion, this literal transcendence of stasis is indicative of the spectator’s adoption of Mason’s idiom from suggestion to metamorphosis via an integration of playful permutations (Adorno, 1970). Its success in doing so is dependant both on the self-referential language and process articulated and communicated throughout by Mason, as well as the instinctive reaction to something shared and universal by the spectator. This reaction dwells in the instinctive knowledge that a ‘worldly preparation’ (Arnhem, 1993) or conscious process has been constructed and developed in order to communicate something personal yet universal. The derivation and execution of the physical act inherent in Mason’s work is translated to the viewer via the energy and detail within every mark – it is, as Aristotle described, indicative of the inexorable evolution from pleasure to contemplation (when ‘the sense is at its best and is active in reference to an object that corresponds’ (Aristotle in Arnhem, 1993).

If this language that Mason has developed in Sets & Series indeed successfully transcends a characteristic limitation of the form, some indication as to the role of contemplation in the formation and creation of the work must be examined. It is not enough for a thing to be a thing – the essence of the thing must be present from conceptual genesis (Watts, 1958). In this case, without affirming or denying the
work, Mason’s act of creation gives action to contemplation through ritual - and embodied within this ritual is another dichotomy. The opposing face of meticulous preparation is the admittance of chance. The precision of etching, scribing, daubing and physically imprinting is perhaps indicative of the calm and unhurried meticulousness that is characteristic of contemplative ritual. Bordering on offering, the ritual of process-driven creation (Reich, 1968) involves a knowledge or expectation of the self, a routine of making, and a public celebration (De Carvalho, 1993). The exhibition of the works is the final step in the ritualistic process, where effectively, the solitude of preparation and the evolution of methodology composed for the act of creation are consummated. The connectedness of the different stages of the creative ritual becomes evident in a contemporary discourse between the artist’s history, biography and persona and the spectator’s own range of experience, mediated by the work (Briggs, 1993). This intertextuality of experience (provided we accept the notion of experience as text) reinforces the universal origins of Mason’s work: being solitary within a community, and differentiating truth (or reality) from illusion.

The opposing face of meticulous preparation is the admittance of chance. Small, but entirely noticeable, inconsistencies of colouration, texture and clarity pervade the repetition of Sets & Series. Through repetition and ritual, Mason admits the aleatoric nature of the subconscious – far from completed precision, the results reflect a more real, earthly approach (in the same way that perfection in composition was a goal never to be attained by the American indeterminist composer Henry Cowell – even to the point of incorporating ‘deliberate errors’ in his works so as not to move beyond his human station (Morgan, 1991). These irregularities in the work make it more human, less hyper-real, cybernetic and machine-like (Rodson, 1999). They serve as reminders as to the evolutionary and tactile experience of the creative ritual and as such, reveal that the act of conceiving and making the work is as much an aspect of the work as the exhibited pieces. In reflecting the ritualised experience, it becomes clear that the exhibited work in situ is not the total piece: the ambit of the opus includes the preparation and experience of its making.

In observing Mason’s work, we are perhaps drawn to the most obvious figures: dark parallels of shifting breadth. The tensions of the work, however, are perhaps contained within successive stages of observation: the fading and inconsistencies of the repetitive marks as material wears thin through repetition; differently coloured replicas of the dominant form; layers of transformed imitations; and the spaces or voids in-between. Together they form a visual fugue, a polyphony of four dimensions within a two dimensional framework. Through its interdependent energy, it moves through time as relief and in doing so, liberates the spaces in-between from being considered as merely happenstance, afterthought or oversight and elevates them to the status of possibility, future experience and autonomy (Berlin, 1958). The breathing spaces between the intensities of experience become as valued as the experiences themselves. It within this framework, too, that the path illuminated by Solzhenitsyn may be travelled: in inspecting the detail of the work, then widening the observable scope to experience the totality, we become a party to the universality of Mason’s observations, applying and filtering them through our own repertoire of experience. Effectively, Mason’s energies discriminate between ways of knowing and knowledge (De Bolla, 2002), and contextualises the result through the ‘interplay of signs arranged…according to the nature of the signifier’ (Foucault, 1969), the ‘fusion of internalised image and external representation’ (Ross & Ross, 1983) and the physicality of viewing (DeWitt, 1987).

It is through this physicality of viewing that Mason’s exhibition achieves clarity through an initial confusion. The issue here is perhaps one of ‘world projecting over world making’ (Wolstonhurst, 1987). Through observation, we are met with a seemingly unending parade of linear figures; but only through engaging with this body of work is the sense of internalisation, synthesis and reflection made apparent. It is a case of vigorous viewing rewarding the spectator. The clarity achieved by Mason through this regime is highly significant: at once personal and universal; simultaneously flowing and fractured; and concurrently minute and colossal.

It is through the careful and negotiated interplay of dichotomies that Mason (literally) makes her mark with this body of work, and this negotiation is summed up expertly in the title of the exhibition: Sets & Series. At the same time, the title is visual and musical; expressively improvisational (as in Berio’s Circles) and highly ordered (as in the serialist composers of the mid twentieth century). In combining apparent opposites in the methodologies and meanings of the work, Mason presents a continuum of experience and possibility, built on the premises of complementarity, integration and hybridity. Evocative attributes and filters for engagement begin when the ordinary becomes the extra-ordinary, when valenki (Solzhenitsyn, 1963) become more important than Pushkin (Berlin, 1958) and when assimilation, retention, expression and transmission become the measures of cultural evolution (Heylighen, 2002) in experientially focussed creative place makings.

Dr David Sudmalis
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Untitled

c. 1989
oil on canvas
97 x 117cm
(collection of the artist)
The Net
1992
oil on canvas
60 x 76.5cm
(collection of the artist)
Swept Away
1993
oil on canvas
107 x 111 cm
(collection of the artist)
Simuland
1994-6
oil on canvas
147 x 116cm
(collection of the artist)
Untitled
1999
silver leaf and acrylic on plywood
58.5cm dm
[collection of the artist]
And then...

Cement testers
2006
21 x 68cm
[collection of the artist]

O#1
2008
lithograph
27 x 95cm
[collection of the artist]
Blurred Noise
2006
ink and watercolour on paper
93 x 64cm x 6 units
(collection of the artist)
Untitled
2007
ink and watercolour on paper
86 x 93cm
(collection of the artist)
White over black over white...
2006-12
oil on canvas
122 x 152cm
[collection of the artist]
It’s Gonna Rain
2012
oil on canvas
122 x 152cm
(collection of the artist)

Knitted sampler
2010
wool and cotton on canvas board
20 x 15cm
(on loan from Jane Emery & Paul Bishop)
Staff: Malcom Bywaters, Director
Deborah Sciulli, Administrative Officer
Robert Boldkald, Exhibition Manager
Georgie Parker, President Academy Gallery Volunteer Club
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