



A Few Words From Down Under

Editor's Note: Judith McGrath contributed her writings about exhibits and events taking place in Western Australia to *Carolina Arts* for about a decade. Although she was writing about events taking place thousands and thousands of miles away, they seemed relevant to what was going on here in the Carolinas. Her contributions were very popular when we first ran them and continue to be popular on our website's archives. We've decided to revisit them from time to time.

A Few Words From Down Under Post Modern Art & Ants

by Judith McGrath, first run in our June Issue 2006

The other day I got an e-mail from an emerging artist who participated in an annual exhibition of work by art students. She wanted to thank me for the kind words I had to say about her exhibit in my review. To tell the truth, I couldn't help but make a positive comment; her work was well thought out, executed with skill and neatly placed in a shaded grassed area of the gallery grounds. At first glance it could be easily interpreted as an innocent narrative that everyone can relate to; ants marching single file toward a picnic setting. However, should the viewer make a subtle mind shift while viewing the installation, they'll find a potent political statement.

The way the artist encrypted her comment rocked me, and I continue to think back on her exhibit and find different avenues that lead to her intended reading of the piece. The artist invited viewers to look beyond the surface of the work to find a hidden truth. With respect for her intention, I did not to divulge the artist's message in my review however I did make a cryptic reference to its meaning. Besides the thank you, her email assured me I had correctly interpreted her art.

The statement made by the exhibit is not as important as how the artist used her art in the way it was originally intended; to communicate something of importance via an ordinary image. By doing this she successfully links today's contemporary art practice to the long forgotten purpose for making art, which is to inform the general populace. I haven't seen any kind of message in student work in a long time. Art students who are celebrated by those ensconced in art academia are often too self indulgent to have much to say about anything beyond 'ME'.

From its inception, the visual arts consisted of pictures and arbitrary symbols to provide a means of communication, first between man and his gods then the ruling classes and their minions. Priests instructed their flock by decorating churches, inside and out, with images of God and Gospels, and symbols for heaven and hell. Peasants and warriors recognized their lords and leaders via family crests and emblems of status emblazoned on banners, armour and personal jewellery. Merchants used signage consisting of images of their wares that were identifiable to the illiterate. Colours, flowers, objects, animals, and figures in specific poses had underlying meanings that were understood by all. A simple example would be a sign decorated with a man in white armour astride a prancing horse and carrying a shield bearing a tankard and a bed to indicate 'The White Knight Inn'.

Pictorial art continued to communicate to the learned and illiterate alike, even during the political, industrial and social changes of the 19th Century. These changes were noted and reflected in the variety of movements we collectively call Modern Art, which commenced around

the mid 1800's. During the 20th Century Modern Art evolved into Modernism, a reaction to speed and greed, and finally Post Modernism that is not so much an art style as a plethora of critical and rhetorical validations for various, sometimes vacuous, experiments in method and media. The Art Establishment was born and immediately closed ranks to the public by declaring only They knew what constituted Art. The new art cognoscenti considered the intellectual/emotional concept that provided the impetus to make 'art' more important than the actual art object. It was a mind-set that relegated pictorial communication to cartoonists and graphic artists while Fine Artists need only present a verbal validation for the object painted, purchased or picked off a tree and placed on the wall or floor. This concept effectively dismissed the need to learn traditional eye/hand art skills. I recall how one well celebrated art graduate haunted junk shops and second hand stores buying up all the old hobby painting, paint-by-number pictures, string art, even varnished completed jig-saw puzzles to display in an exhibition. I forgot the name of the show and the artist but do remember the question I repeatedly asked myself; how can a person be an Artist without having any Artistic skills? Perhaps it was a 'I think therefore I am, an artist' kind of philosophical thing.

When Fine Artists lost the plot, well skilled and creative Graphic Artists came to the fore. Modern Graphic Artists are employed by religious, political and corporate entities wanting to manipulate the mind-set of the masses. And they do it as well as, if not better than, Fine Artists ever did in the dim, dusty past. Pictures and symbols were then, and are now, a valuable tool that can sell everything from salvation to hotels, political ideologies to fast food. Graphic Artists are in demand, as a digital photograph, line drawing, unique image or new symbol can be etched on the mind. Our approval or disapproval of the image will lead us to or away from the person/place/thing it identifies.

Unfortunately the Art Establishment sees the pictorial power of today's Graphic Artist as 'low brow' or 'propagandist' and certainly 'not art'. They encourage Fine Artist to rise above the selling, telling, instant recognition aspect of graphics and produce convoluted works of intellectual significance. In the past, symbols and objects were empowered by their recognition and understanding by the masses. Today Fine Artists' exhibitions run in tandem with catalogues or forums that tell us what we're looking at. Post Modern art needs to be verbally validated as it has effectively disconnected Fine Artists from what art was, is and should continue to be about; communication.

And then I saw the ants exhibit, and I felt like the tide just may be turning. There were other works in the exhibition that also seemed to suggest students were tired of art rhetoric and wanted to put a voice back into paint and well-crafted objects. The exhibit that rocked me involved large segmented ants, beautifully constructed of wood and wire and painted white. In Australia termites are called White Ants, and the phrase 'to white ant' something means to undermine it, destroy it. The picnic setting with its basket and blanket, plates and glasses, food and wine, were all painted black. The black land of plenty was being invaded by those who would 'white ant' their lifestyle. It was a lesson in history, a warning for present, and a lesson in good art for the future.

I felt even more satisfied when the artist said my comments gave her the incentive to continue with her art. Now that

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really rocked me!

Judith McGrath lives in Kalamunda, Western Australia, 25 minutes east of Perth. She received a BA in Fine Art and History from the University of Western Australia. McGrath lectured in Art History and Visual Literacy at various colleges around the Perth area, and was an art reviewer for *The Sunday Times* and *The*

Western Review both published in the Perth area. McGrath was also a freelance writer and reviewer for various art magazines in Australia. She also co-ordinated the web site *Art Seen in Western Australia* found at (<http://pandora.nla.gov.au/tep/25381>). McGrath is currently enjoying retirement.

Some Exhibits That Are Still On View

Our policy at *Carolina Arts* is to present a press release about an exhibit only once and then go on, but many major exhibits are on view for months. This is our effort to remind you of some of them.



Work by Melissa Engler

Groewood Gallery in Asheville, NC, is presenting *The In Crowd: Groewood's Studio Artists Exhibition*, on view through May 10, 2014. The studios, located next door to the gallery, house 11 working, professional artists producing everything from intricate book-based sculptures to handcrafted furniture. The exhibit will feature works in a variety of styles & mediums by Chris Abell, Kathleen Doyle, Melissa Engler, Daniel Essig, Russell Gale, Lisa Gluckin, Carl Powell, Helen Purdum, Thomas Reardon, Brent Skidmore, and Jessica Stoddart. Groewood Gallery and Groewood Studios were established in 1992 by the Blomberg family of Asheville. Located adjacent to the Omni Grove Park Inn, both the gallery and the studios are housed in the historic Biltmore Industries complex. Biltmore Industries originated as a craft school in the early part of the 19th century to better the lives of the economically deprived youth of the Appalachian region. Today, Groewood continues Biltmore Industries' tradition of supporting local craftspeople. For further information check our NC Commercial Gallery listings, call the gallery at 828/253-7651 or visit (www.groewood.com).



Work by Diana Farfan

The Spartanburg Art Museum in Spartanburg, SC, is presenting *Bread and Circus*, a new exhibition of surrealist ceramic sculptures by Diana Farfan, on view through May 16, 2014. Farfan was born in Bogotá, Colombia where she received her BFA from the National University of Colombia. She completed her training closer to home, in Columbia, SC, where she received her MFA in Ceramics from the University of South Carolina. Farfan currently resides and works in Greenville, SC. *Bread and Circus*, which derives its name from the famous quote by Roman satirist Juvenal, refers to a superficial means of satisfying or sedating the masses. The circus theme woven throughout the playful menagerie of ceramic toys, dolls, and marionettes, references this political distraction via spectacle.

The sculptures in the exhibit hold a strong socio-political connotation, as well as a hefty dose of humor. For further information check our SC Institutional Gallery listings, call the Museum at 864/582-7616 or visit (www.spartanartmuseum.org).



Thornton Dial "After the Burn," Fabric, metal, wood, clothing, and enamel on canvas and wood, 72 x 72 inches. Collection of the Souls Grown Deep Foundation, Atlanta.

The Asheville Art Museum in Asheville, NC, is presenting *Social Geographies: Interpreting Space and Place*, curated by Dr. Leisa Rundquist, on view through May 18, 2014. The art world operates within geographic frameworks. Spatial divisions between "inside" and "outside" impact how the art world describes, identifies and validates artists featured within the exhibition. Whether deemed "outsider" – Henry Darger, Martín Ramírez, George Widener – or "self-taught" – Thornton Dial, Sr., Minnie Evans, Lonnie Holley – these artists bear categorical markers that organize their art but do not adequately speak of their art's unique qualities and circumstances. For further information check our NC Institutional Gallery listings, call the Museum at 828/253-3227 or visit (www.ashevilleart.org).

The Reynolda House Museum of American Art in Winston-Salem, NC, is presenting *Reynolda Moderns*, on view in the Northeast Bedroom Gallery, through June 1, 2014. The exhibition highlights the strengths of the Museum's collection of early 20th-century modernism and select loans. The painters in this small exhibition of eight works took the tenets of modernism developed by avant-garde European artists and translated them into a distinctively American idiom. For further information check our NC Institutional Gallery listings, call the Museum at 336/725-5325 or visit (www.reynoldahouse.org).



Nujood Ali stunned the world in 2008 by obtaining a divorce at age ten in Yemen, striking a blow against forced marriage. Photo by Stephanie Sinclair.

The Mint Museum Uptown in Charlotte, NC, is presenting *Women of Vision: National Photographers on Assignment*, on view through July 20, 2014. *Women of Vision* features nearly 100 photographs highlighting the influential work of 11 award-winning female photojournalists, including moving depictions of far-flung cultures, compelling illustrations of conceptual topics such as memory and teenage brain chemistry, and arresting images of social issues like child marriage and 21st-century slavery. In addition to the photographs, visitors will have an

continued on Page 19