

## COMMENTARIES

Contaminating  
space

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Hobart

Installation art often carries with it a nagging conviction that it was, somehow, better before you got there. The tendency towards work with a hollowed-out or haunted air (regardless of subject matter) is possibly related to what Nicholas Zurbrugg has referred to as the 'commemorative impulse' of recent installation art. It may also be a feature of an uneasy relationship between art and viewer. *InstallX4*, curated by Paul Zika, comprised installations by Fiona Gunn, Donna Marcus, Peter Hill and Kevin Henderson: The notion that art work and viewer can impose upon and displace each other seemed an important aspect of most of these works.

There is something personally unsettling, even horrifying, about stretched skin, and Fiona Gunn's use of latex sheets in her installation *Gravity's orbit* (1993) was possibly an overly-forced allusion to this. More affective were the work's purely material properties: the smell and feel of rubber, like a balloon blown up and then deflated, the cold, slightly powdery look. The installation suggested the chill of something forgotten, no living, breathing membrane, but a substance grown monstrous in abandonment. One piece of latex formed a tent, apparently engaged in an obscene attempt to drape the slit edges of its opening around one of the gallery's support columns. A longer piece was wrapped misshapenly around another column, stretched over to a nearby

window, and there caught and held, the final section dangling outside. These two latex pieces drew the viewer into a vaguely circular motion where a 'centre' was unremarkably inscribed by a naked light bulb. Any illusion of tautness became slackened: There was no whiplash in this spiral, nor any sickening descent. Finally, little response seemed warranted except acquiescence to the work's dismal qualities.

Peter Hill's installation *New York Contemporary Art Fair*, 1992, is part of an ongoing project called the *Museum of Contemporary Ideas*. This particular work simulates 'an art fair two hours before the official opening ... We find crates still waiting to be put into storage, some works leaning against the walls of booths, ladders and tool-boxes sitting in the middle of the floor and a strong whiff of perfume and panic in the atmosphere as the doors are about to be opened.' The press kits and promotional materials created by Hill for this 'art fair' were much more competently produced than the forged art works. Eager to critique and to please (with a profusion of art, junk, notes, snapshots, name-dropping, promotional hype and bad jokes) the artist's frenzied depiction of networking systems left the viewer floundering. In commenting on the contemporary art world, Hill seemed to have redefined the boundary between viewer and work as the point where you finally give up in exhaustion.

Donna Marcus's installation *STORMY LAWNS (Concrete Dreams)* (1933) is a re-creation of that oddity, the ferro-cement boat. It was constructed on-site and hung by rope in the building's atrium, and it was probably the least interesting work in the show. Making no real imposition upon the space — being neither unsettlingly big nor especially elegant — it merely dangled. Perhaps effective installation art needs to be either materially or conceptually scat-

tered or diffuse. This work's half-finished quality (a skeletal framework patched up with *papier mâché*) approached that condition only superficially, and Marcus's potentially touching concerns with childhood migrations and her affection for kitsch seemed in this case to have been drowned by awkward execution.

Kevin Henderson is the first Scottish Arts Council-funded resident in Australia (soon he will transfer to Canberra for the second six months of his residency). His installation formed a focus for his time in Hobart. *Divine Economy(s). Division the Cross* (1993) recalled certain Joseph Beuys works, both in use of motif and understated dramatic sensibility. Pulling up sections of the gallery's grey carpet tiles, Henderson laid down a thin layer of white paint and a series of red dotted lines (which continued up one wall), interspersed with squares of brown board, also bearing the repeated image of a red cross. Coolly luminous, these elements comprised a grid system which was complex but elegant. Henderson's framed poem seemed to simultaneously despair of connection with the world, and to whisper tender, hopeful secrets ('loved by her eyes'). There was an unsettling, intrusive aspect to this work.

A paradox emerged from the exhibition's various approaches to the practice of installation. The viewer is, in a sense, both contaminated by and contaminator of a space. Sensual experience — inflected by trauma, memory and desire — became a re-working of the body's own boundaries. Perhaps this is the most compelling aspect of installation art; it demands a relationship between art and viewer, but one which is constantly in flux and charged with a sense of loss. ♦

*InstallX4*, Plimsoll Gallery, Centre for the Arts, Hunter Street, Hobart, 15 May-6 June.

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