

Gunter Christmann

1936–2013

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Gunter Christmann and Jenny Christmann, 1975;
image courtesy *The Commercial*, Sydney

Gunter Christmann arrived in Australia from Berlin in 1959. He began painting in 1962 after an acquaintance returned from hospital with a painting kit he'd been given. Despite the limited colour and brushes, Christmann painted a small reproduction from a magazine cover. Later that year he was showing in 'The Mirror-Waratah Festival' in Sydney's Hyde Park. He took evening classes at the National Art School, but moved on after being told that the problem with an arm he couldn't foreshorten was that he 'didn't feel it'. He joined the Contemporary Art Society. His first one-man show was of op-art paintings at Sydney's Central Street Gallery in 1966. In 1968 two of his works were included in 'The Field' at the National Gallery of Victoria. His fourth Central Street show in 1969 was a major success with work sold to state galleries, the National Gallery of Australia (NGA) and writer Patrick White. By this time he'd developed a 'sprinkle' technique of throwing paint from a loaded brush and dispersing colour evenly across a canvas laid flat on the floor. The resulting tiny dots of paint produced vibrant optical mixes derived from the chromo-luminarism of Seurat. Barely differentiated form allowed colour to hum with trance-like effects (echoed in his later sound works with jaw harp and background noise).

In less than a decade Christmann seemed to have reached a high point in his career: the March 1971 cover of *Art International*, selection for the 1971 São Paulo Art Biennial (with David Aspden), and for the DAAD residency in Berlin in 1973. He found the art there political and conceptual; painting wasn't strong. When Christmann returned to Sydney in 1974, recession had bitten. The avant-garde had moved on to post-object art, and painting no longer seemed a vital subject.

Christmann responded to this challenge by adapting the strategies of conceptual, process and performance art to a painterly idiom. Methods that were more commonly used to bypass painting became a means of starting a work.

He returned to brushed-on rather than thrown paint and began using chance procedures for composing elements within a shallow space. These were the float tanks and dry

boxes of the mid-1970s. Small pieces of debris were floated on water or placed in a gently shaken box to find an arrangement. They were exhibited in the new Rollin Schlicht-designed Coventry Gallery in Paddington that looked to local critics like the latest in international style. In retrospect the work was put in context in the 1985 group show, 'Recession Art and Other Strategies', in which dry-box collaborations with Robert MacPherson were exhibited alongside the resulting paintings.

While at this time photography was arguably making drawing unnecessary, Christmann projected and painted from slides in order to facilitate drawing. The photo provided a schema with which to explore line and colour. Where Joseph Beuys had swept garbage, Christmann painted garbage. *Caenus to be*, in the NGA collection, depicts an inverted nude amid box cardboard and other debris. Inversion of space – weight at the top – had been a constant in his work since the all-over paintings of the 1960s.

Christmann's last decades saw him adapting earlier strategies with new intent. From the doll and shadow paintings and imagery from his Berlin childhood to his recent return to a revised use of the boxes and tanks, the work developed a more personal language and could be regarded as self-portraiture. His major influence at this time, and after her death in 2005, was his wife Jenny. Together they collaborated on her dada collages – a direct and inexhaustible range of deadpan self-portraits.

Over the years Christmann showed with a number of galleries including Yuill/Crowley, Roslyn Oxley9 and Ray Hughes in Brisbane. Coventry Gallery and Niagara Galleries were respectively the mainstays of his early and late career. He began to show with *The Commercial* in 2013 and was beginning to find an audience among younger artists unaffected by dated proscriptions on painting and drawn to the beauty of his handling of paint and to a resourcefulness that never faltered. When he died in November, shortly after being diagnosed with a terminal illness, preparations were advanced for a retrospective at Melbourne's Heide Museum of Modern Art in July this year.