

Stephen Ralph

Stone Villa

Stephen Ralph's work depicts a two-storey terrace house situated in an idyllic parkland setting. The panorama has been painted from digital photographs and presented from three different angles over three panels. The shades of the brown brickwork and pink walls vary from panel to panel, according to the light of day. The sky is rendered matter-of-factly, without regard for fine nuances of clouds or sunlight. The works have been executed in a direct and economical manner: there are no flourishes.

At the top and bottom of each panel, the artist has used paint stripper to delete the outlines of continuous streams of road and air traffic. Reading the triptych from left to right, the paint stripper gradually eats further into the painting until, in the last panel, the outlines of the aeroplanes and cars are no longer discernible. Electricity wires have also been incised into the surface, draping their way along the street with precise monotony.

The building depicted is Stone Villa in Petersham, Sydney, bequeathed to the local council and now housing several artists' studios. Ralph has been working from here since 1998. Petersham is an industrial area of Western Sydney, situated under a busy flight path. These paintings do not exaggerate the daily flow of air and road traffic surrounding the studios.

The use of varying perspectives has already surfaced in Ralph's work. For *Moving House*, made when the artist was relocating, he photographed a house (also in Petersham) from different angles, then traced its outline and the surrounding electricity wires onto acetate paper. He placed this outline on a similar photo taken from further away. The finished impression is of a skeletal frame drifting up and away from the body of the house, leading the viewer to reflect on the dynamics of structure.

The theme of traffic first emerged in Ralph's work in a maquette for a sculpture proposed for a roundabout in an apartment complex in Rockdale, Sydney, near river bike tracks and a train station. 'With its silhouette initiative, the perspex maquette was cut out in a circle of cars following each other around.'¹ In a utopian gesture to a

future devoid of motorised traffic, the sculpture was intended as a 'memorial' to the residents' former dependence upon cars.

There are strong affinities between Stephen Ralph's work and the black and white photos of industrial buildings by Bernd and Hilla Becher. Their photos are devoid of such anecdotal incident as animals or humans, so that the buildings remain the central focus of the compositions. The vantage point of the viewer is subtly elevated so that the subject of each photo stands forth prominently and the surroundings become panoramic.

Ralph expresses a similar sensibility. He also employs a technique of elevation within the composition, combining this with a prominent focus upon each building. The buildings in *Stone Villa* and *Moving House* represent a particular type of architecture that features lonely beacons of domestic inhabitation in industrial areas. In both cases, it is conservationist and artistic impulses that motivate the work. As with the 'developments'² by the Bechers, these paintings are concerned with capturing different perspectives of the same building, setting up a visual narrative where a structure remains steadfast amidst the inexorable passing of time.

The Bechers' emphasis on repetition and seriality engendered a minimalist sensibility that associated them with artists like Sol LeWitt, Donald Judd, Carl Andre and Ed Ruscha and guaranteed a reception for their work situated in a 'late modernist agenda centred in formal, structural and serial procedures'.³ Similarly, it is no surprise that Ralph's work has been exhibited in such artist-run initiatives as Elastic, Front Room and CBD Gallery, alongside Andrew Hurle, Jay Balbi and other artists who explore seriality through photographs.

Ralph's is a dramatic work. The destructive use of paint stripper might be likened to Lucio Fontana's cutting of canvas. The effect of the paint stripper and the 'damage' it has wreaked implies a nihilist sensibility. Through this gesture, the work playfully addresses the conundrum of how to represent that which is absent. Pictorially the *Stone Villa* series is pleasing to look at. In the gallery at Austral Avenue, the aeroplanes at the top of each work form a decorative band that echoes the plaster ceiling rose.

Once again, Stephen Ralph has proved his capacity to express aspects of his immediate existence that reverberate with universal concerns. Sometimes though, you get what you wish for. The one time the artist did need to catch a plane, bad weather prevailed and he was stranded at the airport for six hours. For all of the artist's meditations upon the erasure of traffic, this exhibition was very nearly not hung.

—JANE O'NEILL

RALPH 43

1. S Goffman, 'Art Crawl Marking Time', *Lives of the Artists* #7, Sydney, March 2004, p 17.
2. In the Bechers' practice, 'the principle of a series of single images in which one particular individual structure is presented in a sequence of rotated views is called an "Abwicklung" or a

- "development": Hal Foster, Rosalind Krauss, Yve-Alain Bois and Benjamin Buchloh, *Art Since 1900, Modernism, Antimodernism, Postmodernism*, Thames and Hudson, New York, 2004, p 335.
3. L Cooke, *Bernd and Hilla Becher*, Dia Art Foundation, New York, 1995, p 2.



