

DIENA GEORGETTI

SCOPING TWO DECADES

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One of Australia's most intellectually tantalising and elusive artists, Diena Georgetti is the subject of a recent survey exhibition. While respected artists and art writers based in Brisbane recognised her talent early on and she was represented in the 9th Biennale of Sydney (1992), Georgetti has kept a low profile. Yet the artist has held critically acclaimed solo shows in contemporary art spaces around Australia in the past two decades and, following the Sydney Biennale, was included in the 1995 Australian Perspecta and the 2006 Adelaide Biennial of Australian Art.

Georgetti aligned herself firstly with the alternative artists' space network and preferred to keep her own counsel. Then when her singular work was recognised, Georgetti was taken up by Sutton Gallery, followed by Anna Schwartz Gallery in Melbourne in the early 1990s with other dealers to follow (including Sarah Cottier and Darren Knight in Sydney, Milani in Brisbane and Hamish McKay in Wellington).

Hence, the monograph/exhibition catalogue put together by Max Delany of the Monash University Museum of Art (MUMA) and Robert Leonard of the Institute of Modern Art (IMA) is welcome. For Brisbane audiences it answers the question 'whatever happened to Diena Georgetti?'. We suspected, or at least knew in broad terms, that she had joined the southern exodus of young artists from Queensland in the early nineties: to Melbourne especially. This was after she had contributed not only to shows at the IMA but also at James Baker's Museum of Contemporary Art (MOCA) and the vibrant yet short-lived artist-run ventures such as THAT Contemporary Artspace,



Diena Georgetti, *I have wept so much here that I am touched by my own beauty*, 1997. Chinese ink and acrylic paint on canvas, 51 x 40.5cm. Private collection, Wellington.



Diena Georgetti, *Destrezza sutura and kruez*, 1992. Chalk and blackboard paint on masonite. 35 x 26cm. Private collection, Melbourne.

Bureau Artspace, Aglassofwater and Arch Lane Public Art, in Brisbane.

I turned to early issues of *Eyeline* magazine to remind myself of when Georgetti was first active in Brisbane. Michele Helmrich's article in *Eyeline No. 6* (1988) addressed 'Inter-Face', a project funded by the Australian Bicentennial Authority.(1) This 'art spaces project' was poles apart from the spectacle of World Expo held the same year in Brisbane. Essentially a street event, the Axis group (Paul Andrew, Jay Younger and Lehan Ramsay) with Janelle Hurst, Jane Richens and Adam Wolter, among twenty or so others, contributed large-scale photographs, laser copy billboards, videos, slide projections, electronic mail links, and so forth. Georgetti herself traveled to Rome, Düsseldorf, Frankfurt and London faxing back images to be displayed in MOCA's window gallery space, as if to show that 'Inter-Face' was as much about international information transfer as a Brisbane city phenomenon.

Georgetti crops up again in *Eyeline No. 10* (1989), where Eugene Carchesio reviews her *Rest De Kreatur* exhibition of blackboard pictures at the IMA. (Some of those exhibits are featured in this latest survey). Carchesio writes in prose poem style, '...send messages beyond/ this life's mysteries/ REST DE KREATUR/ enter this darkened space of thought/ stop/ rest this creature/ let the creator breathe/ this is a thinking place/ revise system of logic/...'.(2) In the same issue Georgetti reviews the work of a fellow contributor to Arch Lane Public Art, Karen Turnbull. She writes of 'a reversal of humility' that the artist's chalk drawings of objects (as dissimilar as a pineapple, eyeball, rabbit, flower and a heart) achieved when hung above eye-level and how they were reminders of the bond that can occur between them.

These are the image of the will. We cannot know which is inside and which is outside. They can neither be separated nor look at each other. As if to keep warm, these two extremes must lie close. That is you, and the bird, flower and the mushroom.(3)

In this review, Georgetti gives an insight into the developing idiosyncratic poeticism and humanism that lies behind her own work.

The artist's eclectic trajectories were clearly in place by the end of the eighties; 'her leaps of faith and flights of fancy and freedom, as she moves from one style to the next', is how



Diena Georgetti, *National costume design*, 1999. From the exhibition 'Patent', a collaboration between Diena Georgetti and Anne-Marie May. Acrylic and gouache on canvas board (each), 76 x 56cm (yellow), 61 x 50.7cm (red).



Diena Georgetti, *The humanity of abstract painting*, 2006. Acrylic on board with collage. Monash University Collection, Melbourne.

notes :

1. Michele Helmrich, 'Interfacing the Interface', *Eyeline No.6*, September 1988, pp.8-9.
2. Eugene Carchesio, 'Diena Georgetti: Rest de Kreatur', *Eyeline No.10*, p.36.
3. Diena Georgetti, 'Karen Turnbull: Promotion', *Eyeline No.10*, p.34.
4. Max Delany, 'The blackboard paintings as lexicon and manifesto',

Delany puts it.(4) For there is no obvious logic between the swing from the blackboards with their enigmatic scrawled words in German and Italian (1988-92), the small monochromatic pictures with an Orientalist bent (1993-97); and the borrowings from Cubism and other early modernist-inspired movements that followed. It is here that Georgetti most resolutely refused to relinquish her love of architecture, fashion and design. Furthermore, all her pastiches in painted form have allegorical possibilities and a psychological intensity. The eighty or so exhibits I saw at the IMA, bear this out.

Coincidentally, the same year as her survey, the National Gallery of Victoria (International) mounted a loan exhibition of 'Joseph Beuys & Rudolf Steiner', with Beuys's didactic blackboards of the mid-1970s and Steiner's chalk drawings of the early 1920s. Their 'thought drawings' were concerned with the intersection of art and politics, education and the development of the individual: it is not far-fetched to see that, in her own way, Georgetti adapted such methods in the scrawled phrases and words in white on her early blackboard pictures and that she shared the same idealism. Her texts, nailed up in clusters in Room One of the IMA's arrangement of her survey, may seem nothing more than nonsensical word games, but given the weight of Beuys's influence, as well as that of Wittgenstein and his use of language to disrupt conventional logic, we know she followed such social innovators closely.

Georgetti's blackboards are teaching aids but they are also self-referential, as if inscriptions like 'Espectral lustró' embodied what they described. They are deliberately awkward and clumsy, as though to emphasise the difficulties of learning and communicating meaning and the power evoked by the haptic, or felt, handmade mark. Fellow artist, Eugene Carchesio, empathised with the mystery and conceptual depth of Georgetti's investigations. Early on he saw the blackboards as being freighted with philosophical import, likening them to darkened spaces of thought and a type of concrete poetry of severe purity. He wrote the essay on Georgetti for 'The Boundary Rider', the 9th Biennale of Sydney, stating as much. What is more perplexing is the use of Chinese or Japanese motifs in Georgetti's small monochromatic paintings that came after. These are not blue-and-white (that would be far too obvious) but like the chalk references, they use white on black for their delicate patterning. Might one see these Orientalist

in Diena Georgetti: *The Humanity of Abstract Painting 1988-2008*, MUMA and IMA, 2008, p.8.

5. Diena Georgetti, 'The Humanity of Abstract Painting' [artist's statement], in Diena Georgetti, *ibid.* p.34.

6. Robert Leonard, 'Parallel existence: Diena Georgetti's recent work', in Diena Georgetti, *ibid.* p.55.

7. Diena Georgetti, 'The Civilisation of the Abstract' [artist's statement], in Diena Georgetti, *ibid.* p.50.

'The Humanity of Abstract Painting 1988-2008', was shown at Monash University Museum of Art, Melbourne and the Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane, 2008. Curated by Max Delany and Robert Leonard.

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works as a response to the impact of the Asia-Pacific Triennial on the Australian artscape and the activity of Asialink's programs? Maybe. Yet they exist primarily, I believe, as whimsical reflections on ancient philosophers and teachers, each in a cartouche of his/her own, surrounded by symbolic markings and those resembling aspects of an often far from benign natural environment.

One figure reminds me of the 11th century female novelist Murasaki Shikibu who wrote *The Tale of Genji*, the still highly influential novel which is prized for its psychological richness. Another figure is a hermit drawn from the tradition of Chinese literati paintings. Yet another figure has the robes and mortarboard of a Western philosopher surrounded by the halo or radiant aura of a Christian deity. These Chinese ink and acrylic figures painted on masonite board have a visual didactic logic, yet half-close your eyes and the cartouches also resemble crocheted placemats or an intricately worked tablecloth. Furthermore, they defy a straight interpretation of 'high art' through their titles which are elusive, at times flippantly serious and often intentionally self-absorbed. For instance, what is one to make of *Co-existence appears as some kind of accident* (1994) or *I have wept so much here that I am touched by my own beauty* (1997)?

I found myself attracted to the puzzles of these images; they are cross-cultural and teasing. With *I have wept so much...* there is a sense of 'retro' which suggests op-shop visits even though it is assuredly a painting in the 'fine art' tradition. In short, Georgetti pursues an aesthetic that is not purist. It delights in its collagist process, one that amalgamates the overlooked, the awkward, with the sensitive and lyrical. Many of the little pictures which followed the blackboard pedagogical works and the largely Orientalist-inspired ones make you want to laugh out loud for they seem so familiar, yes, and so human.

The nostalgic longing implied by *I have wept so much...* belongs to a series of domestic scale works where silhouetted female figures, single or as a twosome dancing, are juxtaposed with a proscenium to suggest a stage in a small city dance studio of the 1950s. The background colour (soft grey or muddy aqua) aids that interpretation. I note from the catalogue that several are in private collections in Wellington where Cuba Street, for instance, (with its shabby remnants of that period jostling with edgy dress codes) comes readily to mind. There again, there

are shades of Melbourne here with its wealth of creative reinventions of pre-loved clothing and life-styles. I am intrigued by the silhouettes of the cut-out figures in these works with their stylish geometric hats and dresses. The wit through which Georgetti, without fail, composes 'past and present' visual references from her bank of eclectic imagery, with an unapologetic bent to common emotions, however banal they might seem, is absolutely unique. The looped velveteen curtains in this particular work play on sentiment as they seem to dribble and weep through their fringed edges above the smartly attired figures, while the Le Corbusier-inspired abstractions below, redolent of the family kitchen linoleum, float notepaper-like: a series of broken promises?

After her Orientalist borrowings, Georgetti seems to have developed an inexhaustible hunger to feed her allegorical musings by delving not only into design but architecture and early Western codes of modern painting. The Japanese-like economy of formal expression is still there in *I couldn't find another way to tell these things I had to say*, but there is also a nod to Yves Tanguy's Surrealist works of the 1930s. Although, the reference is never direct. For in such a work is a clear figurative reference to the natural world. This is also true of the flower-like form in *A project for the future – but there is beauty in the wait* (1998) and the tuberous shape with roots in *Looking forward – feeling backward – for a second anyway – it was thrilling to live to unlive everything* (1998). The titles can be trite and illogical but we identify with their sentiment, more fully than if they were grammatically correct, because this is how ordinary conversation normally is, to others as well as to oneself.

It is as though this artist has a bower bird mind which collects fragments of language as well as memories of visual codes that she is attracted to, and which she stores in her computer. Then, when the moment is right, in highly individualistic ways she brings them all together, harmoniously, within a single canvas or board (even a peg-board on occasions) with an accompanying descriptor or parallel text. The final 'frame' is important for many of the paintings (especially the later ones) as they too are intentionally of various modernist styles, from ornate Rococo-revisited to the plainest of moldings. It is as though the artist increasingly acknowledges that abstraction belongs within a domestic setting. To underscore this, in Room Two of her survey at the IMA one wall was painted a chrome

yellow and on it a row of framed paintings was hung; and the larger Room Three was double hung in some cases, with over twenty-five separate works from 2006-07, all with heterogeneous frames.

The exhibition catalogue also bears the domestic sentiment out as there are numerous ghost photographs, sometimes as backgrounds to the text, of stylish modernist interiors (including the artist's own home—now just outside Brisbane) and of Bauhaus residences admired by Georgetti. We see her paintings perched on cabinets near well-stocked bookshelves and comfortable, yet stylish, seating. The personal investment involved in making these paintings is confirmed in her writing. At first a desperation or disappointment may occur,

The painting isn't as you need it to be. I take it through my day, and night life. I set it in the bathroom while I bathe. I arrange it amongst my interior furnishings, and invite social events for it to be present at. I look for it in the glow of the TV. I catch it in the mirror ... I continue testing it like this until it proves indeed to be a construction made of every activity, design, thought, object of the situation.(5)

Georgetti's abstractions of the late 1990s are wonderful accretions of colour blobs or blocks of irregular planes growing within or at the edges of a pastel-hued field. (These particular works are unframed). With titles like *National costume design* (1999), they are, again, highly idiosyncratic. Sometimes Miro is evoked with the playful biomorphic form in *The kindness of thunder* (2000) while, more recently, Kandinsky and his spiritually inclined improvisations, and above all the sway of Cubism's influence seems to have taken grip. Robert Leonard writes that Georgetti's work now favours 'Archipenko, Le Corbusier, Leger and Prampolini. Her work is all about the juxtaposition, layering and remixing of styles'.(6) For me, Australia's John Power comes to mind with his antipodean 'take' on synthetic Cubism. For in these paintings of Georgetti there is the same robust (feet on the ground/floor) appreciation of the paintings of figures like Gris and Metzinger and their desire to construct by means of colour and geometric form. In fact one work the artist titles *The humanity of construction painting* (2006), deliberately giving a wood-grain finish to the background of her strange machine-like form in the picture's centre, can surely be read as a type of clock sitting on a Memphis-style shelf. Like many of these recent works, it

suggests a scene, a space for a still life or landscape, a stage set perhaps.

At any rate, the architectonic force of her abstract vocabulary has become marked in those works she titles *BLOK/Plastik* from 2006-07. It is here that the artist reminds us that it is the early 20th century masters of geometric design and architecture that inform her most recent paintings and that, like many of them, she sees no division between art and life, believing, somewhat wishfully, that it is 'In the residence of Rudolph Schindler, his colleagues and their wives, I invite myself to warm wine and communal sex. ... In living a parallel existence with these modernists, and all they have gifted me, I am provided more familial relevance than any blood or gene.'(7)

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