

## John Beard greets the Sphinx



John Beard's development as a painter highlights some of the most important dilemmas and questions facing art in the late twentieth and early twenty first centuries. Like Oedipus, Beard has answered the Sphinx in a very direct matter of fact way by holding fast to the two realities of art; the reality art seeks to reveal and the basic nature of the material that is transformed in the process of that revelation. Finding ways to make these two realities chime synchronously is the alchemy of art.

Painting today offers great challenges to artists who genuinely wish to explore the boundaries of their medium's potential. It is this exploration that makes the best work compelling regardless of its subject matter or aesthetic pulse. In fact I believe this has been a motivating factor in the most important painting since the renaissance for example since the 16<sup>th</sup> century artists have considered that oil painting exemplifies the metaphorical and literal transformation that occurs when an artist takes earth (pigment) and creates the image of a subject with a spiritual dimension. I will test this proposition as a way to get at the core of Beard's achievement. In modern times there are compelling examples of artists whose best work changes the way we look at painted representations. Modernism made us look at the nature of the medium of representation as an end in itself often at the expense of the pictorial. I contend that this aspect of art in our time is still fundamental to the transformative quality of art. Postmodernism celebrated the profusion of image sources available to contemporary artists but it was not necessary for this to cause artists to abandon attention to medium specificity.

What has interested me is the work of artists who care little about taking either modern or postmodern positions but continue to mine the medium and find new ways to break it open and make it work for and against itself. This is not about image versus abstraction but on the contrary it is a question of how either one or the other work as objects upon which our sensibility and intellect can build. It is against this background that I hope Beard will emerge as a thoughtful artist who bridges the best of late modernist concretism and post modernist exploitation of proliferating imagery. The presence and actuality of his work is predicated on persistent aspects of Western art

reinvented in their own image by successive generations since the renaissance.

Gerhard Richter is an outstanding painter who has undertaken a sustained conceptual analysis of painting using the critical lens of photography to analyse the way our eye reads the materiality of paint while registering an image at the same time. I will look at Richter's studies in relation to the history of Western painting as a way of bringing Beard's work into context. Anselm Kiefer is another artist who completely rethinks the way the medium works to capture space as idea and as concrete experience. To do this he constantly challenges embedded conceptions of what constitutes painted representations of space. He does this not by conceptual analysis like Richter but by stubbornly refusing to be type cast. Kiefer fiercely defends himself against the technical and theoretical constraint of what is thought possible or necessary in painting taking extraordinary risks that potentially lead to forms that confound our understanding of the medium. Kiefer himself says he is not a painter and his two dimensional works are not painting within any traditional understanding of the term.

Beard it seems finds a position that is more conceptual than Kiefer but is equally not risk averse when he comes to experimenting with media. I will also consider Beard in the context of twentieth century metaphysical painters who explore the affective potential of space in their work in ways that have little to do with the conventions of spatial representation for example Ad Reinhardt, Yves Klein, Bob Law, Shirazeh Houshiary and Agnes Martin. I will compare some later Beard paintings with specific works by Bob Law in particular. I contend that Beard at his very best qualifies for consideration in this company. He struggles to hold closure at bay in this ancient art form by interrogating the material means of representation and the optics of its reception. The imagery is incidentally very poetic and relates to evocation of memory that is supported by the material means he adopts. First though I want to examine the cultural context in which he has evolved his very particular practice. The late 1970s and early 1980s was a difficult time for artists committed to modernist principles and I will be presenting Beard as essentially following an analytical investigation into painting that started out against a prevailing background of new image painting and neo expressionism.

John Beard enrolled at the Royal College to do post graduate studies in 1979-1981. It was an interesting time to be part of the London art world during a resurgence of many forms of figurative and expressive painting that came to the attention of a broader public with Rosenthal and Joachimides' *New Spirit in painting* exhibition at the Royal Academy London in 1981 and *Zeitgeist* at Martin Gropius Bau in Berlin 1982. Figuration as such was clearly something the market and many young artists yearned for after decades of abstraction, minimalism and conceptual art that had been blamed for inducing a kind of cerebral exhaustion. In hindsight Minimalist artists are not the hollow, content free or affect free zone they have been made out to be and I will return to this later because in effect it was their efforts that returned our focus to the object at hand rather than pointing away to some past or imaginary

subject beyond the art object. This presentness is at the heart of the mature Beard's painting and perhaps it was always there even when he was surrounded by the new image painting flourishing in London during the late 1970s. In the early 1980s the desire for narrative haunted the many outgrowths and contestations of Minimalism in the USA and Arte-Povera in Italy and yet the most successful of these outgrowths built on the material presentness of the Minimalists as well as European non compositional, non referential art in the twentieth century.

By the early 1980s what the curator Achile Bonito-Oliva termed the Italian Transavantgarde seemingly discarded the historical avant-garde to bring narrative back into centre stage in visual art. I say seemingly because the most sustainable works for example those by Clemente are a logical evolution from, rather than a rejection of modern approaches to representation. His work makes reference to different cultural contexts for example when in India he adopts a style inflected by Indian iconography and often uses traditional techniques and images from Italy however this adopted style of his locus is always filled with personal, erotic and sometimes mystical references. It is his material language and its site specificity that captures his real experience of living in these places and helps form the work. This helps prevent its decline into illustration, which is the fate of much of his generation. Others by contrast returned to an idea of or at least the look of self expression that the minimalists had tried to eradicate from their work thereby distancing themselves from Abstract expressionism.

The Minimalists had established an art of materials and space and real non referential objects that is they referred only to the concrete reality of their immediate experience. The resurgence of self expression reversed this relation to the world claiming instead to reveal something internal to the artist as if the innards of an artist might be of interest to the public like a kind of augury. My most profound objection to this tendency is that it ignores what seems to me to be the main point of art. Art is most effective when it deliberately, or simply by virtue of the way it is structured, bridges perception and conception, that age old chestnut that never the less remains a central preoccupation of artists and philosophers. For art to get anywhere near giving us the experience of straddling these ways of being in the world it must necessarily embrace a very real address to concrete and external reality. I will return to this problem further on.

At its best the Transavantgarde appears to have more in common with Arte Povera than Oliva implies. For Oliva identifying this group was an attempt to supersede the Arte Povera artists who were closely associated with the curator Germano Celant. In fact it was more of a curatorial turf war than a substantive break in artistic vision. Oliva captured the moment when visual artists widely adopted Post-Modernism including all forms of appropriation. Bonito Oliva described this as a generation who turned away from the notion of originality and progress in modernism and claimed access to all of history and cultural diversity. Everything became grist for the artists' improvisation. There is nothing wrong with this any more than there is anything wrong with Pop artists turning to the products of the mass media. It only becomes

questionable when in either case it becomes pure illustration or worse still nostalgia rather than critical re-contextualisation.

It was also a time when the death of the author and the end of originality was revisited and embraced by many artists with the inevitable rudderlessness that entails. Semiotics was not only applied to art criticism but worse still some artists tried to structure their works in the light of post-structural literary criticism. Appropriation, a-historicity, a-originality, and the dead author were all terms that peppered discussion about art. The real value of rethinking the role of the author was often missed, that is not the absence of an author but the emphasis that should be placed on a creative reader. It is possible that the readiness of artists to uncritically accept the idea of an absent author was at least in part informed by a residue of the views propagated by Feminist and Marxist theorists of the previous decades against the self expression of the Abstract expressionists. This movement had (not entirely accurately) come to be seen as a male testosterone driven art. Certainly the idea that some internal processes within the artist as genius could and would produce great art did not feel right any more but the problem of denying originality is that it cuts the thinker off from direct contemplation of the world as it is presented to the senses.

In much of the Anglo Saxon world the French theorist Baudrillard was taken very literally.<sup>1</sup> The exploratory intellectual proposition that the referent had disappeared into the signifier seemed to support the rift between art and life rather than acting as a clarion call to keep the real in sight within an undeniably media drenched environment of information flow. At its best this investigation into the structure of representation and its sensory correlative drew attention to the idea that representations are also material facts and in art we sometimes manage to hold that materiality in a delicate balance with meaning. Beard seems to me to have intuited this from the start and much of his early work seems to be about investigating the structure of painting while allowing evocative imagery to emerge from within a material experience and then retreat thus shuttling between sensation and cognition.

Important Avant garde art of the previous two decades had been more attached to the real world than it was to successions of style but taken literally this semiotic criticism seemed to make the subject of representation its own history rather than actual events in the world. Some new image artists saw such a reaction to modernism in the theory of art as a way to maintain a conceptual and critical relation to representation. It was sometimes a theoretical screen behind which narrative painting could be reintroduced. It seldom took off as art since it was primarily referring to something outside of itself or for that matter outside of primary experience. It was for a time hard to distinguish 'Bad painting' the style, from simply bad painting; Self consciously 'deconstructive painting' from illustration or simply untalented expressionism. It was a time when de Chirico could be hailed as a hero in light of his anti-modernist stand, for his appropriation from art history and his

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<sup>1</sup> In 1984 Baudrillard gave a paper at the conference 'Future Fall' arranged by Sydney University. His influence on writers and unfortunately on a lot of younger artists was to engender an art and criticism that refused to even talk about the real world as a suitable source for art.

self appropriation, his denial of originality, not to mention his appalling pastiche of painterly style.

For over a century the mainstream of modern artistic practice had been framed as a repudiation of the decorative, narrative, academicism and the sentimentality of Victorian painting. Now all bets were off risking everything with complete disregard for what had been a hard won cleansing of visual culture in the twentieth century. These post-modern artists might have seen themselves as overthrowing what was now the old order of the modern. In support of this Oedipal position the work itself and the theoretical discussion that surrounded it acquired a veneer of appropriated semiotics to provide the sheen of conceptual and moral superiority. In hind sight much of this endeavour generated an anachronistic return to illustration and decor. Some works of this kind did achieve credibility as an extension of anti aesthetic conceptualism, in as much as they critically deconstructed authorship and expression. To me this seems yet another kind of illustration albeit an illustration of theory.

However alongside this kind of activity, and often taken to be part of it, were individual artists who were following their own investigations into the nature of representation and the precarious boundary between art and life as an expression of sensory perception and conception. Gerhard Richter for example seemed to be making no distinction between imagery and abstraction - between painting and photography and yet as I will try and describe later his painting is profoundly focussed on the literal function of paint and optics just as much as Donald Judd focuses on the material quality of wood or metal and the way it works with space and light. I think this is where a close study of Beard's painting seems to fit in against this background of confused representations and theoretical illustration.

In the late 1970s and early 1980s at the Royal College a relatively sophisticated version of a British transavantgarde could be found in artists like Graham Crowley and Tim Jones and these were to be Beard's peers. Beyond the walls of the Royal College promising artists such as Christopher Lebrun pushed the margins of abstraction and figuration essentially working a gestural field in which winged horses and other classical references could be detected. Lebrun talked about wanting to escape from an abstract orthodoxy but did not feel able to return to naturalistic painting instead he found classical or neo classical references less difficult to import into what remained essentially abstract configurations of painterly activity. By leapfrogging contemporary life and direct observations of nature he and others like him felt less guilty than they would if they simply returned to mimesis. Interestingly this was not the first time that this dilemma arose for young British artists. I recall David Hockney talking about his indebtedness to Francis Bacon in 1961 when he was feeling hemmed in by the abstraction that prevailed in European art from the late teens of the late twentieth century, and wanted a model for a legitimate way back to figuration. In his case a form of illustration emerged. At first this was dressed quite successfully in the authentic look of drawing from the unconscious, in the manner of Francis Bacon, but in Hockney this deteriorated into fully fledged illusionism and

décor. It is my impression that Beard was very much aware of all of this background and yet his early images maintained a very personal character often displaying a rather cocky bravura usually with an underlying eroticism that was hard to put your finger on<sup>2</sup>. I think it was more the touch of the paint than the imagery that conveyed this feeling of grungy sensuality.

I suppose the only comparison I can think of here might be Philip Guston who had retreated from Abstraction by this time to depict his rather shabby environment on East Tenth Street in Lower Manhattan amongst the garbage cans and empty bottles. Many of his peers in New York at first saw this shift by Guston as a betrayal of the Abstract expressionist position he had been identified with in the 1950s and 1960s. At another level it was a return to political mural painting he had begun in California after working in Mexico with Diego Riviera and Guston's school friend Jackson Pollock. Guston's new figuration was grounded in a deep understanding of the nature of painting learned during his abstract period. By transferring his painterly skills to capturing the sensations of street life in New York he shifted away from a purely formalist position towards an art of the everyday. Contrary to immediate impressions the ethos behind this is not so far removed from the philosophy of Pop art and Minimalism anchored as they were in the real. It is the way Guston navigated image and abstraction in the painting process that bears some comparison with the way Beard was to develop as an artist.

In 1983 Beard came to live in Perth, Western Australia. I was deputy director at the Art Gallery of Western Australia at the time and came to know him almost as soon as he got off the plane. It was a small town then but John was in any case going to make a mark. As I recall it the meeting was at a welcoming party at Guy Grey Smith's beach house. Beard had his portfolio with him and it was at once clear that there would be a place for him in the exhibition I was working on. 'Form-Image-Sign' was scheduled for 1984 at the Art Gallery of Western Australia. This exhibition was my attempt to unpick the various strands of figuration that had emerged in the previous few years. I tried to find the best of expressive painting, the more digestible examples of semiotic forays and critical examples of appropriation. The work he had to show at that time included some interesting drawings that seemed to be derived from a language that was still in the air twenty years after Hockney invented himself as a figurative painter at the RCA. There are traces of early Hockney to be sure but also behind that of Peter Blake, maybe of Derek Boshier. This is not the legacy Beard would choose for himself I suspect but this is what I inferred from the fragments I first saw. This comment is not about imagery as such but about the use of applied elements such as in collage.

Interestingly on the international stage Pop art was parallel with Minimalism and although the aesthetic and logic seem very far apart both drew directly

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<sup>2</sup> I realise that this sentence is verging on the obscenely metaphorical but this seems to me to convey the visual language as well as the body language of the artist at the time. He played up the rough, funny, charming Welsh boyo with a sense of humour that was not far off Benny Hill's and the rubbery eroticism of the imagery he produced captured this without, as I recall, ever making any direct sexual allusion.

from everyday life from found images and found objects although Pop was more inclined to acknowledge Duchamp at the time. The main spokesmen for Minimalism, Donald Judd, Frank Stella and Robert Morris avoided acknowledging Dada as a source perhaps not least because it was European. There was a closed scene amongst advanced artists in America in the early 1960s and early 1970s. They sought to start over, avoiding all the errors as they saw it of European art. For Pop and in particular the early European Pop artists there were direct and incontrovertible connections to dada. In 1947 Both Eduardo Paolozzi and Richard Hamilton visited the very last exhibition of Kurt Schwitters who at the time was living in exile in the English Lake District. Both these artists were profoundly influenced by what they saw and in the case of Paolozzi he immediately began work on his Bunk portfolio of collages inspired by Schwitters. It is reasonable to assert that these collages constitute the opening bars of the international Pop art movement.

Collage in itself maintained its transforming influence on art of the twentieth and twenty first centuries not only as a way of integrating found imagery but as a compositional strategy even when pasted fragments were not literally used. In the 1970s this took the form of silk screen prints based on collage principles that artists such as Kitaj and Tilson used as a form of image bank to be used later in paintings. This way of composing with fragments is one of the strategies that we will see again and again in the paintings of Beard. The possibility of reconstructing fragments from nature and culture also facilitated the creation of hybrid human forms including machines for acting out aspects of human life. Beard's early paintings in Perth capture some of this hybridisation. Eroticism borrowed from the mass media and turned against itself has also always had a place in both dada and Pop Art. Marcel Duchamp created fantastical machines that acted out sexual transgressions, that he said were better represented with machines than with people. Hamilton's satire on the ideal home and the motor vehicle as advertised using sexual inferences are well known and indeed many of the images in Bunk by Paolozzi also juxtapose erotic imagery from mass marketing with war time propaganda in a deliberate attempt to draw the insidious inferences they entail. The use of industrial materials in Minimalism is a parallel to this although it is not a critique of industrial methods so much as a political attachment to the here and now and to the presence of the material for what it is rather than as a means of representing some non present something. For someone like Judd that was in itself a political position.

These and other positions developed by artists in Europe and America after World War II built upon the Cubist and Duchampian break with the idea of the art work as a mimetic form of representation firmly putting illustration to one side of the modern agenda. In its place the material and the process of making art objects including the connotations of the materials, the presence of the material to our senses and traces of process became a primary concern for artists. It was no longer enough to simply make a likeness however well executed and with whatever brilliant stroke of the brush. Each work of art had to also interrogate its own structure representing space as in some way embedded in the painted surface without resorting to traditional techniques such as linear and atmospheric perspective. In fact for the Minimalists the art

object should not represent space but embody that space. It was an experience of the real or a fragment of it. It is possible to make a case that some of the most progressive art since the Renaissance already had a built in creative process that privileged facture over narrative and I will return to this when discussing specific works by Beard.



[Untitled 1978 ]



[Untitled 2 1978]



[Untitled 4 1978]

In 1978 Beard made some very interesting drawings that sometimes used collaged elements and sometimes used the logic of collage but without necessarily cutting and pasting materials. Take for example, 'Untitled' 1978 and 'Untitled 2' 1978 and 'Untitled 4' 1978. These works combine elements of drawing, painting, found images, cut and torn edges elementary explorations of the possibilities of the material he is using including the objectification of the gesture. In 'Untitled 2' for example layers of collage seem to have been torn back revealing an archaeology of imagery. 'Untitled 4' moves away from collage per se but it involves an investigation into various ways of putting paint on, finding the natural limits and tendencies of paint to be opaque or transparent to stay where it is put or to pour off the edge in runs that seem to append from a black bar that bisects the composition. These runs are a given property of wet paint but they also suggest an event observed in the external world. This is very much an exercise in understanding the materiality of his medium and in layering imagery something that he maintains throughout his work.

Some drawings from 1980 extend this layering and uncovering process but without the collage. This working back into layers sometimes produces a scratchy kind of line. This was not the lyrical line of a Brett Whitely but a line that felt its way groping with the surface of the paper and the technical qualities of the pen or pencil. This expression of difficulty seems to me to be a kind of performance of reconciling knowing and seeing. Our embodied consciousness reaches out to feel the limits of our sensibility with at best partial success. We can sense the motion of the pen as it struggles to find expression of what the body feels. It is almost as if we can relive the moment not as an empathetic engagement with some internal process of the artist's but with this probing and scratching around in search of external reality. I find a similar expression of this search in the mechanised drawings of Rebecca Horn where pens attached to articulated spears scratch erratically at the paper beneath them. In Horn's case we also have her body extension performances from the 1970s as a clue. In these she extends her body for example by meter long protrusions from her fingers with which she searches out the space of a



room or attempts to manipulate objects. On the one hand these scenarios can all be seen as frustratingly tragi-comic failures and yet they highlight this mind matter problem precisely.



[Untitled 1 1980]

'Untitled 1' is the most architectural of these drawings. An open space frame that could be read as a table is surmounted by a pyramid that is only partly open, one plane is shaded in but still translucent. The frames seem to have been shifted around causing double exposures or intimations of motion. Inside the frames more exploratory lines and layers of semi opaque paint feel their way around the architecture sometimes beginning to perform some structure of their own but dissolving into the mist. I have only glancingly referred to Francis Bacon but there are aspects of the early works that might be related to Bacon. The space frame and the podium that figures are presented on as if they were sculpture before they were painting. This is something that both artists explore and this becomes very clear for Beard in the first works done in Australia.



['Jumping' 1980]



[Untitled 111]



[Dog 1981]

'Jumping' 1980 takes a line for a bounce around the space provided here by the page itself defining its limits. 'Untitled 111' introduces the Kangaroo although at this time Beard had no plans to come to Australia. It seems to be a caged Kangaroo although the bars can also be thought of in relation to the curtains that appeared in many of Bacon's paintings in the 1950s including the popes. Like the Bacon paintings this introduces an element of spatial ambiguity. The Roo itself is excellently realised capturing the contraposto as the creature starts to turn in mid leap seemingly caught off balance. The use of negative space that helps form the animal is skilfully handled so that the drawing seems almost incidentally to have given rise to a likeness. It is first

and foremost a play of layering of dark and light and of exploratory line. 'Dog 1981' is another favourite of mine with the same delightful appearance of happenstance. This fortuitous appearance of something coming into being as if independent of the artist's intention is often something that comes early in an artist's life but becomes more and more illusive as experience builds up making chance less obtainable. For some artists retrieving or creating the conditions for this moment of discovery becomes a central obsession.



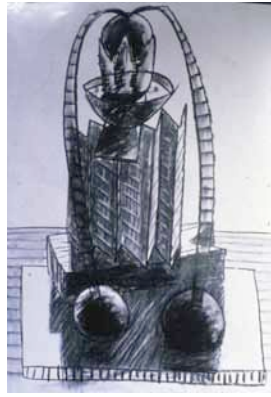
The painting 'Untitled' 1981 [Untitled 1981] is still very much a combined painting and drawing. Following on with the Bacon analogy this one takes the form of a crucifixion. A lay figure appears from the waist down apparently suspended from a beam that runs up behind it. The beam is in fact a kind of ribbon that flows forward after passing the base of the figure but the figure casts a strong shadow onto it giving it a feeling of solidity that contradicts its fluid motion. On the other side of the figure another ribbon coils more lyrically contrasting with the more solid looking version at the right. The way the feet come together is suggestive of crucifixion but we see no arms or nails. Below the figure is an interesting structure or stage with sketched in space frames reminiscent of Bacon but directly below the feet of the suspended figure

Is an arrangement of eight short tetrahedra placed symmetrically overlapping by half the hypotenuse to create a negative octagon in the centre into which the figure might potentially fall.

In 1983 when Beard and his young family arrived in Perth he was faced with a number of challenges. He was unknown in Australia and the creative context he was emerging from was equally unknown. Although his outgoing nature and generosity with friends and colleagues quickly endeared him to the community he still felt like a Welsh boy uprooted and disconnected. I recall that from the beginning he was determined not to be confined to the enthusiastic but tiny and ultimately self-perpetuating art world of Perth. He asked me who his natural peers might be in the Eastern states and set about building bridges. This was a wise move because with very few exceptions, notably Brian Blanchflower, it was all too easy to become an accepted artist in the community but to lose a critical sense of the challenges that are essential to continue to make relevant work.



[Potato man 1983]



[‘Study for Int ro Out ro’ 1983]

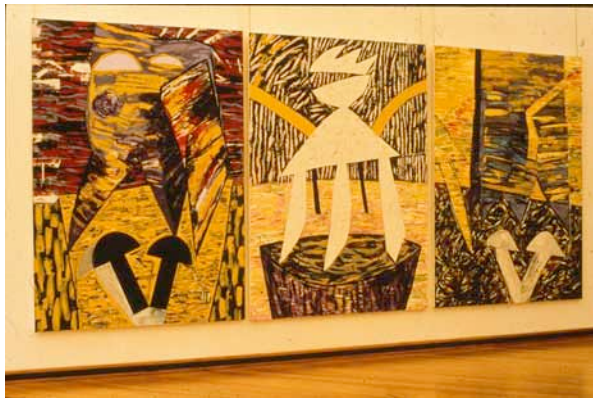


[Rif Raf 1983]

Many of the first paintings he made in Perth depicted an isolated central figure somewhere between a jester and a king. Often they were captive or in the stocks. Again like Bacon the figures were placed on a stage. A common theme in 1983 was a recurrence of the number three, whether triangles, tetrahedra, or more pictorial elements like tripods, and three pronged hats. The last of these appears in all three of the images here, ‘Potato Man’, ‘Study for Int ro Out ro’ and ‘Rif Raf’. It makes me think Jester’s hat before crown but John has spoken of the threes as somehow referencing the three crosses as well as the trinity. ‘Potato man’ is one of the most complex pictures of the time even though he seems pretty solid even sculptural. A single figure on the stage albeit a tripartite figure. Three body/heads three pointy hats, three legs. The body is encircled by something like a magnet or could it be the arm of a Windsor chair? It might be for protection or it might be a restraint. The figure stands on a triangular stage that is set against a seascape; its eyes stand out on stalks or are they binoculars? If this was Bacon we might confuse them for weaponry. The sky is on fire and the horizon is dissolved into blinding light. This happens in Perth as you watch the sun setting into the western sea there comes a moment when in its dying instant the sun flashes out across the water in one dazzling last burst. It is peculiar to Western Australia because of the intense light and clear skies but also of course because it faces west. Many of us migrants from gently grey Northern European skies find this moment exhilarating but also a confirmation that we are in very alien territory where nothing is quite as it seems.

The feeling that Potato man is on a stage is enhanced by the subdivision of the canvas into three vertical strips. The two side panels are too narrow to be able to decipher clearly however there is a lot of painting going on in them. In some ways they seem to be suggesting some distant fantastic landscape and yet their attachment to the frame and their position relative to the figure and base make them act as if they are curtains that have just opened to reveal the splendid events within. The Potato Man stands backlit by the startling sky and rippling sea while through the glare we can make out a sailing ship, there is always one of those in the Indian Ocean off Perth or Freemantle. This use of the panels seems to me to have evolved from the collage strategy I referred to above. It has nothing to do with naturalistic space but returns our attention to the paint and its negotiation of surface and its layering of fields and figure. This recalls a passage by Ian Burn about Jasper Johns in his exhibition

catalogue for an exhibition he curated at Ivan Dougherty Gallery in Sydney, 'Looking at seeing not reading'.<sup>3</sup> He noted that Johns' richly textured low relief number and alphabet paintings attract our attention by virtue of the possibility that they might be open to some kind of textual interpretation. In gazing at the surfaces of these numbers we become minutely aware of their tactile qualities. Finally however we are forced to the conclusion that what you see is what you get, there is no translation and yet we have been given a close encounter with the material of the painting. We have seen it in a way we might not have had it been a purely abstract deployment of texture and colour. I would go further and suggest that this experience of the work approaches the point at which perception and conception touch.



Purdah 1983

I believe that at his best through the ambiguities he creates in space and surface Beard also takes us on a phenomenological journey. The triptych of the same year 'Purdah' continues some of these themes of tripling and placing figures on a stage or balancing them on unstable objects. The use of screens or curtains also operates here. The space is demarcated by a curved line or horizon something like some of Bacon's triptychs. The wall or space beyond that horizon is strongly textured suggesting more of a landscape than a wall unless of course it is wall paper. In the right hand panel a kind of screen or curtain comes down across what might be taken for the distance yet the curtain is woven into that field in places and divisions that function as lines are in fact made up of negative space in the screen. I think it is possible here to see both traces of the early collage and the drawings from the late 1970s.

The puzzling treatment of figure and field and field within field has for me a curious similarity with Anselm Kiefer's impossible spatial applications, not that they look like them in any way but that they both raise perceptual issues in relation to our visual field.

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<sup>3</sup> Ian Burn, 'Looking at seeing not reading' Ivan Dougherty Gallery Sydney 1993.





Anselm Kiefer - 'Glaube, Hoffnung, Liebe' 1984-1986 AGNSW

'Glaube Hoffnung Liebe' 1984-86 from the Art Gallery of New South Wales collection is an example that I have had many years to contemplate. I believe it to be one of the most successful of his early attempts to attach three dimensional objects to pictorial painted fields. It is not a case of assemblage or collage in the cubist sense nor does it function as a dada composition of elements not even Schwitters' more lumpy assemblages. Collage gives relatively even weight to the elements it assembles they might suggest space within themselves or in the way they overlap each other but they continue to owe allegiance to the plane to which they are attached. Kiefer on the other hand has created an integrated painterly surface that represents a strongly defined perspectival space. He only uses fixed point perspectives and does not attempt to create tonal or colour recession nor to soften focus with distance. As a result the image of a receding plane continues to sit on the surface. So far the trick is straight forward it is a bit like looking at an isometric cube which can be read in two ways with a given plane receding or advancing depending on a random selection by the brain of the viewer.

None the less the surface is describing natural space. The attached object in this case a propeller is projected out about 10 centimetres from the surface on a rod which is not really visible when the work is viewed directly from the front. In this case it is "attached" to the rocky mid ground which we can not help as seeing receding towards the sea and the distant horizon. Kiefer made the propeller out of lead so that its transcendental potential to fly off over the horizon would be frustrated. So does it lie on the rocks? Clearly not, there is no possibility of it becoming engaged with the perspectival regime of the painting. Is it seen as rushing through space towards us? I don't think so after all it is made of lead and it has clearly crashed as the tips of the blades are buckled. In any case this does not seem to be what we experience. Does it look arbitrary and stuck on with no apparent spatial or logical integration with the pictorial surface? Strangely, and this is the miracle of the work it seems to be exactly right where it is even when there is no optical or logical explanation for it.

After years of simply enjoying the masterful reconciliation of a paradox that arose primarily out of a symbolic association of images I finally came to see it somewhat differently. Firstly Kiefer has made this as one of a series of images that intimates the possibility of transcendence only to bring it down to earth. Here the Dionysian symbol of the rotating propeller creating a helix as it moves through space is contradicted by the leaden material that Kiefer sees as Saturnian and earthbound. In all the works that deal with this failure of literal transcendence from broken stairways to heaven, broken rockets, lead

wings etc the constant asking of why there is no transcendence is more to do with a distant hope or longing that Peter Scheldahl called the listening.<sup>4</sup>

This propeller then is neither crashed to earth nor heaven bound it is in a kind of suspended animation before the painting neither participating in its pictorial structure nor oddly contradicting it. It is in a different space-time from the painting, Transcendence remains an open question. More interestingly perhaps this is an example of how art can embody the conundrum of mind and matter through its material structure. The optical result for the viewer, whether we get it at first or not, is that we intuit what it is doing. Kiefer is also a literary painter in the reformation manner incorporating text for reasons of complexity that have more to do with Cranach than with Roy Lichtenstein. This is a third mode of representation that makes full appreciation of the work even slower and more ambiguous. Like Duchamp I value delay in resolution of complex ideas. Ambiguity is not always contrary to our understanding of the real as we experience it.



[The Agent 1984]

Beard's 'The Agent' 1984 takes a turn towards a more normal configuration of the body compared to 'Potato man' but in other ways the space is equally weird. The Agent seems to walk across the waters of Sydney Harbour if as I assume that is the Opera House mid left. What constitutes sea, mid distance and sky is far from clear, these divisions of the canvas seem more about providing a space for some painterly virtuosity than representing actual space. This virtuosity almost incidentally brings the components of the composition

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<sup>4</sup> In an essay about Jackson Pollock 'Les drippings' the American writer Peter Scheldahl made a list of things Pollock did not do. One of these headings was transcendence. The idealism of psycho-spiritual lift off is, in its many forms, the fountainhead of endless modern cant. It embodies a desire that is real enough, a desire that Pollock plainly shared. But he never claimed that any such thing is made actual in his work. It isn't and it isn't in any work of art. What is actual in Pollock's best work is the closest, fiercest, most honest asking: asking for transcendence, asking why transcendence cannot be. The silence of Pollock is a silence of listening down into the self, out into history, everywhere. There isn't an answer. But there is the listening. Peter Scheldahl 'Les Drippings' from *The Hydrogen Juke Box: selected writings* ed Robert Storr Berkeley University of California Press.

into a firm allegiance to the surface. Suspended like Kiefer's propeller in front of the field, the figure and various odd rather scatological forms seem to be suspended. On the right of the figure three cocoons float in space. One of them might be in the process of giving rise to an imago. Could this possibly be read as an image of the artist heading east in search of artistic rebirth but about to tread in the poo? I doubt if it is anything that literal but it is the kind of reading he opens up through his scattering of obviously symbolic forms in front of fantastical fields. Like Kiefer's forms, suspended between visual realities, these objects demand some kind of narrative reading from us. I find the autobiographical interpretation tempting since although Beard and his family were successfully established in Australia he could not settle intellectually. This roving figure could just be him in constant pursuit of a career that was increasingly international but where he was never able to make a permanent home. His biography since the late 1980s sees him moving back and forth between Australia, London, New York, Lisbon, Madrid, New Delhi, New Zealand, Paris and now back to Sydney as a base from which to target the rest of the world. Often he would spend long periods in each place sometimes years. Even then he travelled to make exhibitions elsewhere.



[Frame of mind 1986]



[Gimlet 1986]

The paintings after 1984 become increasingly sophisticated in terms of brushwork and colour and often far more abstract. Some of the bravura of 'Potato man' gives way to softer more integrated figure field interplay. 'Frame of mind' for example retains some recognisably Beard shapes that may or may not be figurative references but the colour and texture in the field has taken on something of the Abstract expressionist palette and mood of pre-figurative Guston. However the collage effect remains as part of the layering process where underpainting remains in some places and is covered in colour elsewhere. This actually recalls Rosalind Krauss writing about Picasso's collages in 'Originality and other Modernist myths'<sup>5</sup> Here she talks about how the edge of a collaged piece of newsprint makes one form while defining the edge of something else. This is much the same with the way Beard weaves figure and field layer by layer.

<sup>5</sup> Rosalind Krauss, 'In the name of Picasso' published in *Originality and other modernist myths* MIT Press Cambridge Massachusetts 1986.

'Gimlet' also 1986 also shows this layering process and the figurative element takes several forms from the clumping bands of paint that look as if a figure has been completely wound around with a vast length of scarf through to a line drawing of a cartoonlike two finger salute that looks as if it might be a left line rather than a positively applied line. Either way this language of positive and negative within and without the figural seems to be everywhere.



[Portrayal 1986]



[Chair 1987-88]



[Head painting 1987]

Three portraits between 1986 and 1988 continue employing the layering and figure field play but the figure is almost lost in the process. Faces appearing out of the painterly process and retreating into the field, 'Head painting' 1987 is particularly interesting as in hindsight we can see premonitions of the 'Andraga' series that he was to spend years painting after 1992 and via the Lisbon paintings to the recent large scale white on white and black on black portraits. Now you see it now you don't seems to be a persistent theme in Beard's painting from this time on and indeed his personal presence in Australia became more and more sporadic from about this time.

In 1986 Beard travelled to take up a residency in New Delhi for three months before visiting New York. Over the next three years Beard travelled extensively in Europe and America while holding down his role as Head of Fine Art at Curtin University in Western Australia. He was a great role model for the students who could watch an artist who is constantly pushing the parameters of their own art and teaching can not only travel the world but arrange exhibitions at Los Angeles and Chicago in the process. In 1989 he was awarded an Australia Council fellowship to spend four months in Manhattan at this point he stood down as Head of department at Curtin. In Australia Beard had met and befriended John Walker who by this time had returned to New York and was a great help in getting Beard started. In 1990 Beard settled in New York to prepare for two exhibitions one in Manhattan the other in Chicago. He stayed there till 1991 when he returned to Australia for a few months to prepare a show with Macquarie Gallery in Sydney.

Following that he moved to Spain for a year where he prepared an exhibition for London then moved to Portugal for two years. In 1993 he returned to Australia to take up a residency at Victorian College of the Arts for three months before returning in 1994 via India to Portugal where he was to prepare for exhibitions in London, Madrid and Lisbon. In 1997 he settled in Sydney



and since then he has divided his time between Sydney, London and New York. This is hardly a settled life but by now Beard had established a life style that needed constant motion to be able to exhibit and work continuously around the world. Living in Australia is not easy for an artist, the market is not large and one decent selling show every two years is the best most artists can expect. By relocating Beard was able to keep up the pace of his artistic development and support two families one of two grown up daughters and his ex wife in England and his current wife and teenage daughter who live with him in Sydney and often travel with him to his projects overseas. If Beard was unsettled by his move to Perth in 1983 his peripatetic life since then has done nothing to make for a more stable life however he seems to have thrived in the face of many difficulties.



[Blank thought blood remembering V 1989]



[Untitled I 1989]

In the Manhattan years some of the Guston effect was left behind and Beard made a number of much simpler more abstract compositions. This might have been a response to making a series of mono prints around 1989. The technique of mono printing reinforced the collage effect and produced some beautiful sharp images such as 'Blank thought blood remembering V' 1989. This kind of simplification from the mono-print technique re-entered the painting at that time as for example in 'Untitled I' 1989 in which an apparently applied rectangle contains one broadly gestural field laid over another loosely configured composition. Inevitably travelling, seeing new art and living in different environments was going to feed into the artist's imagination. One of the turning points seems to me to have come when he moved to Lisbon in Portugal 1992-93 and again 1994-96. There is something very tactile about the stones and walls not to mention the light in Portugal and maybe this had its impact. In Lisbon Beard took to wandering about with a sketch book going back to basics by drawing what he saw wherever he went. He eventually found himself returning to one site by the cliffs which it seems to me was the one thing that changed everything. Beard had found a still point in the turning world that he had been traversing. Actually his rock of ages is hardly still, it is just off the coast at Lisbon and is surrounded by raging seas constantly changing as the waves surge around it. The rock is Andraga and he paints it again and again, a black stump surrounded by creamy white water.



[Andraga 2 1993]



[Andraga 38 1994]



[Andraga series 1]

The Andraga series quickly evolved from a naturalistic response to the visual image of the rock but it evolves into a persona with some of the anthropomorphic qualities of the early figure paintings but now there is a level of sophistication and a simplification of figure field effect this centrally placed character heralds a new way of composing that is still remotely informed by the history of collage and layering but now it is not so much hiding as a form but transforming into an idea. The other reference that comes to my mind is the still life painting of Giorgio Morandi. In one of his paintings at Art Gallery of New South Wales the arrangement of bottles and jars is evocative enough of a real group of objects but they are also woven back into a painterly surface where figure and ground are in an ambivalent relation to each other. In one space between the bottles there must have been an intimation of naturalistic space because Morandi has taken the drastic step of inserting a slab of colour that relates neither to figure nor field but none the less effectively staunches this naturalistic leak in the composition. The three objects are otherwise carefully anchored into the field by for example the alignment of the rims of the objects with the far edge of the table and with each other so that even the bowl on the right is lightly connected to the shoulder of the tall bottle where it sits against the table edge. These ploys enable us to understand the objects as existing in space but we experience them visually as a series of flat shapes juxtaposed into an abstract division of the pictorial surface. This resonates strongly with the way we read beard's images.

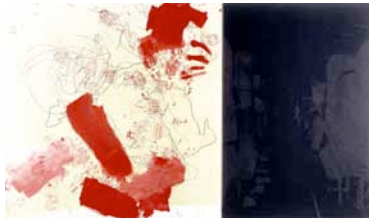


[Giorgio Morandi, Still life 1957]

A completely different kind of life experience makes itself felt in the work around this time. It is one that makes explicit some of the inferences about the boundary of consciousness that is explored in the painting. Travelling relentlessly down the back of a Jumbo unable to quite get to sleep we drift in space, always between times. In the semi darkness of the cabin, we all must on occasion feel an unreal sense of being neither asleep nor fully conscious of

our environment. This in-between state might occasionally bring on the sensation of heightened awareness. Some object presents itself to our gaze but we don't immediately recognise it so that it becomes a strange even disturbing presence or epiphany. I think that a series of photographs, videos and drawings done about this moment make it clear that Beard saw the relevance of this state of affairs to the creative process he was engaged in. This was also a time when his young Daughter began drawing and Beard sometimes collaborated with her to make images in which mark making is not yet prescribed by likeness and yet it is engaged with a sense of urgency. Maybe it is possible to consider this infantile state to be an equivalent of the semi conscious condition of a passenger on a long flight. In any case Beard made diptychs that juxtaposed shots of dark aisles of aircraft with the collaborative pages of mark making by the child and the deliberate withdrawal of conscious intent in the father's marks.

The aisle also acts as a visual passage into the frame suggesting absorption into the picture and presumably the consequent occlusion of our consciousness. Later he photographed his child playing in flour scattered on the ground. This compulsion to make tracks that explore the nature of things and leave a trace in the world is primal and universal. The rational regime imposed by developmental psychology assumes that this stage will be channelled into more productive and prescribed representations. For the artist the issue may be to hold onto the urgency of the primal urge while also being able to negotiate meaning. There are many ways of returning to this theme whether it be thought of as forms of transcendence or as a means to anchor meaning in the real not by representing it but by performing the alchemy of transforming paint into idea without sacrificing the materiality and the urgency of the moment.



[Age of prescription VI 2000]



[Age of prescription VII 2000]

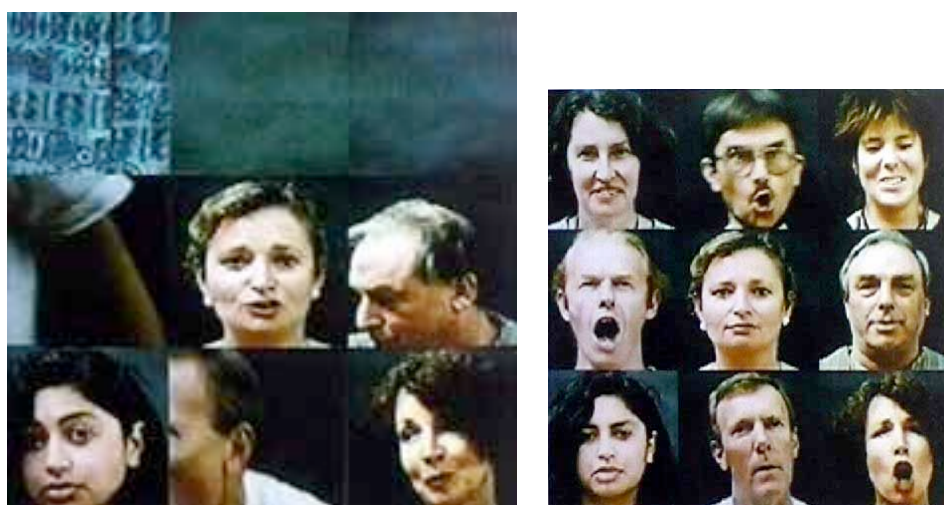


[Age of prescription VIII 2000]



[Viva I (Quartet) 2005]

In 1996 Beard completed an artist in residency in Wanganui New Zealand and here he formed this idea of making video portraits that might also feed back into painting or in some way sit alongside it. These videos and related paintings were influential in the work he showed in 1998 at Tate St Ives. He was invited to take up the first of their residential programmes. This way of thinking across media also played a part in his 'Heads Phase I & III (Self Portraits and Wanganui Heads)', Art Gallery of New South Wales, and later in 'Painting the Century, 101 Portrait Masterpieces 1900-2000' at The National Portrait Gallery, London. This introduction of other media had a liberating effect on the painting as well as introducing the function of duration more emphatically into the work. It is also parallel to the evolution of the portrait series of paintings that underpin the work between 2000 and 2010. The earliest of these started in the late 1990s



[Wanganui Heads 1998-2001]



[Head –self portrait 1996] [Head-self portrait V 1996] [Head- self portrait I 1997]

The beginnings of these portraits was in the self portraits in which the likeness is barely visible and Beard has returned to the process of layering which now seems more like making and unmaking the image moment by moment. He was using semi opaque layers of paint to conceal the face just as it began to form and then scraping back to reveal a bit more before cancelling it all out again. It was as if he was battling with the very issue of process and content that is all the more conspicuous when the image is a self portrait. This may be a good point to look again at the contemporary and historical precedent for thinking about the emergent image. Gerhard Richter is an obvious starting point for me in relation to Beard firstly because of his use of

multiple image sources including photos and media images. His layering techniques in abstract paintings also have something akin to Beard's painting. He often creates a fairly elaborate field but will then drag a squeegee loaded with one colour of paint over the dry surface so that glimpses of the under layer can still be seen. This layering of the surface intimates space without creating its illusion. In this respect it is not so different from the use of layering in Beard's painting. His treatment of figuration as equivalent to abstraction is also akin to the balance Beard is seeking in these portraits.

Richter has built up a repertoire of marks that is partly embodied in an enormous collection of photographs that capture textures and rhythms in nature and in the built environment. He often paints over these photographs with painterly texture by dragging paint lightly with a palette knife over the post card sized images of landscape, clouds, or roof tiles. Some times these modified photo paintings are rephotographed and occasionally the resulting image is re-touched with paint. This 'making equivalent' of different media goes further as for example when he makes figurative paintings based on photographs and imitates the accidental effects created by the camera such as lack of focus and a slight movement of the camera producing a smeared effect. I wrote to Richter putting a case for the interchangeability of photography and painting in all his work when I was curating an exhibition for the Art Gallery of New South Wales in 1992.<sup>6</sup> Richter never answered the letters until the pictures arrived and one piece that was not included in the list we had agreed on was a photograph that exactly matched in scale and tactility the painting of Ema that hangs in the Ludwig Museum in Koln. The photograph was taken of a painting that was in turn made from a photograph. Here was Richter's acknowledgement and the work was of course acquired for the collection of the Art Gallery of New South Wales.

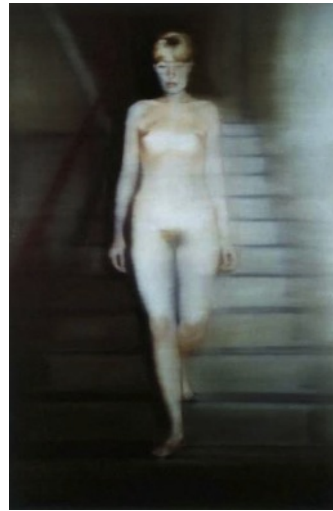
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<sup>6</sup> Richter Kiefer, Polke, Beuys an exhibition in conjunction with the Boundary rider the 9<sup>th</sup> Biennale of Sydney 1992-93 in which each of the artists used photography and its chance effects as an integral component of their painting.





Gerhard Richter - 'Abstract painting (812)'  
1994



Gerhard Richter - 'Ema' 1992

Although Richter is fairly considered to be a conceptual painter, in that he interrogates the grounds of image production, it is I think revealing that he refutes any suggestion of distance or irony in his work. Richter claims without any hesitation or sense of irony to be a painter in the European tradition of Velazquez. It seems to me to be a very revealing choice of Velazquez to compare himself with. Of all the Baroque painters Velazquez was the most concerned with manipulating images and paint surfaces to compel attention from a viewer not only to the subject of the painting but also to the way in which the artist had laid down the paint. Often the most ecstatic passages of paint are in parts of the canvas far removed from the face of the sitter for example. His great masterpiece 'Las Meninas' is a consummate play with all the conventions of the formal portrait.



[Diego Velazquez Las Meninas 1656-7]

Velazquez, 'Las Meninas' is so complex that there has been significant academic disputation over the exact scenario that is being played out. In this charming family grouping the artist himself stands before his great canvas looking towards the viewer who stands more or less where the king and queen must have been standing to be painted. The painting itself is turned away

from us and according to Donald Brook<sup>7</sup> we see it reflected in the mirror on the back wall. Foucault in his famous account of the painting believes the mirrored image is of the King and Queen who stood on the spot before us.<sup>8</sup> I am more or less convinced by Donald that his account is the true one not least because he can do a pretty convincing diagram of sight lines that make the image on the canvas not the position before the composition the one that is reflected. Also of course while Velazquez would have had to make up the scene behind him in any case the logical scenario favours his giving us a glimpse of the painting he is working on. Apart from the artist there are two other figures looking at the viewer or the King and Queen, the Dwarf in the foreground and the Figure standing in the open doorway to the right of the disputed mirror. The layering of states of reality and of representation in this composition are complex and deliberate. The hidden painting, the glimpse of it in reflection far off and blurred, the watcher in the door that leads out into the world beyond the composition, a reminder of the relation of the real to the representation, and above all the location of the viewer before the frame make this an obvious precursor to the layering and multiple forms of representation in both Richter and Beard.



Titian, The slaying of Marsyas, 1575

Balancing the competing desire to expose the materiality of the painted surface against the need to represent a subject has a long lineage in the history of Western art. For example Velazquez follows from Titian whose late paintings in particular draw attention to the fabrication of the image through the wildly fragmented brushstrokes. Vasari noted in his *Histories of the artists in the 16<sup>th</sup> century*<sup>9</sup> that when you look at a late Titian close to all you can make out is the trace of the artist's hand in a flurry of brushstrokes. He went on to point out that only as you step back from the work does the eye resolve the blur of brush marks into a coherent image. This resolution of the image within the viewer's body clearly enhanced the affective potential of the work. No longer were we presented with an illusion of reality to be consumed as given but now we were responsible for finishing the image off

<sup>7</sup> Donald Brook, Correspondence with The author after the publication of *Self Portraits: Renaissance to contemporary* at AGNSW 2006.

<sup>8</sup> Michel Foucault, "Las Meninas," *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Vintage Books, 1970), 3-16.

<sup>9</sup> Vasari in his 'Lives of the artists' Vasari wrote of this aspect of his late works that they 'are executed with bold, sweeping strokes, and in patches of color, with the result that they cannot be viewed from near by, but appear perfect at a distance... The method he used is judicious, beautiful, and astonishing, for it makes pictures appear alive and painted with great art, but it conceals the labor that has gone into them.' I would argue with Vasari from a contemporary perspective that revealing the work is precisely what Titian did.

by our movement around the image. This seems to me no different in principle from the attention Donald Judd compels us to bring to his box like objects that while minimal in expression still hold within themselves multiple views, and illusions brought about by real conditions of light and perspective. As Michael Fried<sup>10</sup> and subsequently Rosalind Krauss<sup>11</sup> have noted this contingency in the viewing of the work produce an active participant in the viewer thereby reintroducing an anthropomorphic content to what is at first sight hollow abstraction.

Since 2000 Beard has painted many more self portraits and portraits of others usually close friends and relatives but more recently historical figures from Marilyn Monroe to Darwin, Rembrandt and even The Sphinx. He has also painted iconic landscapes such as Ayres Rock and the rocky headlands in St Ives and Sydney and wildlife, which was also by the way a fascination of Francis Bacon's. However I will concentrate on the portraits since this seems to me where the new way of thinking about images and their reception comes to a most poignant head.



[Brian 2001 watercolour]  
watercolour ]



[Head –self portrait 8 2001



[Parliament 2, 2003]

Some of the most compelling of these for me are the black on black paintings which were originally done as watercolours and later in wax and oils. Beard did no drawing in these paintings but resorted to his long term strategy of layering but in this case with significantly enhanced sophistication. Each layer of black watercolour was dilute and by applying it very carefully wet

<sup>10</sup> Michael Fried, 'Art and Objecthood' Artforum June 1967

<sup>11</sup> Rosalind Krauss 'Allusion and Illusion in Donald Judd' Art forum 4.no.9 May 1966 .



paint on dry he was able, by leaving transparent layers and adding more opaque layers to gradually build up an image within the body of the paint. This use of multiple coats of watercolour is against the traditional use of the medium which is usually thought of as very transparent allowing the white paper to illuminate the image from within. Here the finish is an extremely dense matt surface. Its transparency lies in the fact that when light falling on the surface passes through the dark layers it brings out variations in density that produces the image.

These images at first seem to be black rectangles but by moving around the image in different lighting conditions the viewer glimpses transitory images that are strikingly life like. The image emerges from the gloom just like the epiphany of something strange on a 747 at night. They seem to be memories emerging from forgetfulness. They only exist as images because we bring them into being by our presence and by our motion. This is the magic of Donald Judd and perhaps also of Titian. The reproductions are a cheat because to have the reader see anything at all they have to be photographed under very controlled lighting which is not how we would experience the objects normally. Technically these works are very difficult to do. If the wet paint disturbs the previous dry layer it catches and makes an irrelevant painterly incident. Beard lost a lot of paintings in this way. I recall the black paintings of Bob Law from the 1970s which are also impossible to photograph and nearly impossible to make.

Bob Law was erroneously described as the father of British Minimalism which frankly never really happened. From a distance these paintings seem to be black squares with nothing much happening within them. However these works are anything but empty. Law layered different colours between the coats of black, painting directly onto the untreated white canvas. He used very dilute acrylic paint to create a profoundly matt surface which is completely flat with no indication of the human hand. This flat matt black surface defies the eye to exactly pin point where it lies in space. The Art Gallery of New South Wales has a painting from the series, 'Blue Black Indigo Black' 1977. Anyone who looks at the work for more than a few seconds begins to sense the depth in the subtle veils of indigo and blue within the black which immediately becomes a vertiginous void. In order to achieve this effect Law flooded the canvas with liquid layers of colour just as Beard did for a portrait such as 'Brian' shown here. The liquid colour had to be brushed out evenly so as to leave no trace of the brush and make a perfectly smooth surface. He allowed two or three days for drying between layers to provide maximum absorption and to avoid one coat catching on another. It was a strenuous process that required technical mastery. He reported that sometimes the eighth or tenth coat could go wrong and then three weeks of patient work would be lost. He estimated that only one in eight survived to completion.<sup>12</sup> I can't help thinking of the paradoxical materiality of these works in relation to Malevich's black squares that seem to be nihilistic, anti-representational gestures and yet on close inspection reveal layers of carefully

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<sup>12</sup> 'Bob Law in conversation with Richard Cork' catalogue *10 Black Paintings 1965-70*, Museum of Modern art, Oxford, 1974.

applied paint that leave a powerful trace of the artist in the void. This is I imagine very similar to the process Beard used in his black watercolours.

Law described this void in his work as a Zen space for meditation.<sup>13</sup> He was very aware of the obvious reference to Malevich's 'Black Square'. This iconic suprematist painting declaimed the end of visual representation and yet seemed to suggest a metaphysical window onto infinity. Malevich spoke of this kind of work as allowing the artist to become a kind of aeronaut defying gravity. Yves Klein's adventures in the void also reference Malevich and when he is described by Thomas McEvelley as a conquistador of the void Malevich is deliberately being invoked.<sup>14</sup> The resonance of these ideas and their material presence in painted objects with the late paintings of Beard and his earlier musing on the edge of consciousness on 747s is striking. These works by Law and Beard have been made in such a way as to produce a powerful visual phenomenon that has considerable affective potential. Unfortunately these friable surfaces are very vulnerable. Law believed that most of his early black paintings were damaged beyond restoration. The problem is exacerbated because the optical depth they achieve is dependent on the spatial ambiguity of the surface as much as on the depth of layered colour. The smallest mark on the surface denies its visual ambiguity and instead of space you start to see the mark as image. This necessity for an undisturbed field also accounted for so many paintings never reaching fruition. It is impossible to go back and achieve an even coat once you have any incident in one layer and the same applies to Beard in the watercolours.



[Leopard 2007]



[Hilarie Mais 2005]



[After Andraga 3 2009]

Subsequently Beard began experimenting with ways of achieving the same fugitive qualities in oil painting. This is not quite possible because the layering of transparent coats without the gestural intervention of the brush does not work in oils. However he did find a kind of equivalent effect that was appropriate to the medium. This entailed creating an over all surface of small marks or dabs that do not stand out from the field but allow the artist to build up the kind of layering within a uniform surface that brings about a parallel visual ambiguity to the watercolours. Perhaps the most extraordinary of these are the 'After Andraga' series in which a suggestion of the rock and sea is built up and then virtually erased with sweeping strokes of translucent white paint that brings Richter's abstractions or over painted photos back to mind. The over painting is applied by wiping, smearing and applying with a

<sup>13</sup> Anthony Bond, 'Recalling Bob Law' in the book *Bob Law* published by Riding house press London 2009.

<sup>14</sup> Thomas McEvelley "Yves Klein: Conquistador of the Void," in *Yves Klein, 1928-1962*, Houston, Institute for the Arts, Rice University, 1982.

cloth or paper then pulling it off to produce what seem like accidental effects. This contrasts with the meticulous dabs that have built up the previous paintings and we assume lie beneath the surface of this wave which overtakes the rock. This effect suggests to me the rock as encountered by the sea itself. The sea in this case also being the oceanic experience that Beard has tried to capture since the 747 insights.

Although Law's works are essentially abstract they embody visions of infinity, of horizons transcended. Likewise although Beard's images are apparently portraits or landscapes they embody something that gets behind memory to connect us to infinity. We may look solid in our bodily manifestations but all this too easily dissolves and returns to the whirling void. Our material beings are on loan from the cosmos and made of the same stuff reconfigured briefly for our convenience. There is no way art could teach us this by any literal narrative it is something we more or less know intellectually but feel unsure of emotionally. What art at its best might sometimes do is embody abstractions in the process of transforming material into ideas. It is the magic of this alchemy that captures us but at the same time we are brought to the brink of glimpsing just what it is to be a consciousness inhabiting a material world. It is often very funny maybe more often tragic but as long as we pay attention to it in some way we are alive thanks to art.