

Meg Buchanan

Sculpture, according to American painter Ad Reinhardt, is what you back into, in an art gallery, when you are trying to see a painting better. This simple prescription would seem to suggest that the two wall-mounted elements that make up Meg Buchanan's recent installation work as painting only. To accept this is to underestimate it's potential.

Meg Buchanan's was the 7th in the program of installations held at the Canberra Contemporary Art Space under the banner CONVERSIONS. The installation consisted of a painting and a relief, each occupying an entire wall at the extreme ends of a rectangular room. The positioning of these two elements served to emphasize the void between them and orient the viewer within the space. The installation was set up to stretch to extremes the rapport of the components across the room, announcing a dramatic tension to the viewer positioned between them.

The painting and relief are established as opposites, in part by contrasting their locations and the flatness of one against the sculptural effect of the other, but interestingly, equally by the similarities between them. First impressions suggest the frieze-like composition is identical in both panels, each depicting figures in an architectural setting, possibly a studio or domestic interior. In both cases the image is described with forceful and dynamic line drawn on to the paper surface of the painting and cut into white card to form the relief. The interlocking shapes are therefore defined with edges real and apparent to act as another contrast. The complex surface of the painting provides a texture distinct from the pristine white card of the relief. The panels are both monochromatic, but the painting is layered and patterned with tertiary colours restricted to sober grays and earths, while selected elements in the relief are backed with a vivid palette of primaries that reflect subtle afterimages that stain the polar surface.

Buchanan is an experienced printmaker and admits she wants to create paintings incorporating some of the qualities she admires in an etching plate: the subtle textural shifts across the picture-plane, and the notion of image so imbedded in the geography of the surface that it is seemingly intrinsic to the support. Although using very different approaches in each of the two panels in the installation, Buchanan has succeeded in this ambition. Additionally piquant is the impression of a relationship between the panels that might be likened to that of a printing plate and a print, or a positive and a negative. Such comparisons can overstate the similarities, presuming a mirror opposite.

The similarities do act to make the composition transparent, giving prominence to the production - i.e. the difference between colour and non-colour, painting and sculpture, etc. The correspondences also serve as a prompt to force the identity of each half of the installation to emerge. The search for identity across the room highlights the process of experience and reflection. This is a journey through time and space. The paradoxes of absence and presence, of unity and difference, and of active and passive forces that echo continually across the room energizing this well-defined space confirm the sculptural qualities of the installation. The same contradictions encourage an awareness of the viewer's own identity as mediator.

This kind of reflexive self-awareness saves Buchanan's Conversion from operating as pure theatre. The contrasts inherent in aggressive jagged white monumentality and soothing, subdued and intimate tonalities are absolute. But to be distanced in the void between these polarities allows the poetics of emptiness to triumph over the rhetoric of detail. We are converted to a mood that is elegiac, wistful, and strangely vulnerable.

Michael Desmond
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