

# Peter Vandermark

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Although Peter Vandermark was born in Melbourne in 1960, he is essentially a Canberra artist, who trained at the Australian National University School of Art, worked for almost a decade as a studio assistant to one of Canberra's most famous artists, Rosalie Gascoigne, and has practised his art from Canberra and worked in Canberra art institutions.

Peter Vandermark is quite a cerebral artist but one armed with a quirky and subversive sense of humour. Rosalie Gascoigne once declared: "The artist makes works that move out into the world. When the work is relinquished it should speak for itself. As its audience, you are on your own. You look at what the art presents, you don't read a book. Your eye provides the evidence. If need be, fight to understand it. Each response will be very different from every other. Bring the naked eye, make friends with your own conditioning- or on the contrary, forget it- and look. It's between you and the empty space to feel the presence of the work."

Peter Vandermark's art has the same sense of quiet, unassuming, disarming honesty as Gascoigne's work, where we can follow his practice and see the transformation that he has imposed on the materials which he has scavenged. Whereas Gascoigne is largely a rearranger of found elements, Vandermark is essentially a transformer of these elements into new and evocative realities. As is the case with any good sculptor, his purpose is to create a new and convincing order, one which seems at the same time both permanent and unchangeable.

There is a refined 'quirkiness' in Vandermark's work and one could argue for a particularly Canberra sensibility. He makes beautifully crafted crisp cerebral creations which have a strong sense of irony. Even titles of his early works, such as the *Joy Filter* or *Mood Amelioration Unit* seem to imply assorted accompaniments for some sort of Canberra designer home. These sculptural objects, which in themselves are scavenged from waste, build on the great modernist tradition of functionless machinery, but in the process create objects of considerable elegance, grace and beauty.

If earlier artistic responses to Canberra life were frequently cased in terms of existentialist despair, with references to the 'unreal city' and other allusions to T.S Eliot, Vandermark has subsequently produced sculptural trappings which institutionalise reserved emotions and sensibilities. They are very compact and accomplished little monuments to suppressed passions and suppressed despair- key ingredients to many a Canberra dinner party.

Vandermark is frequently concerned with recycling found objects and with manipulating their surfaces and giving them a crisp hi-tech designer finish. For him, Marcel Duchamp and Sol LeWitt are significant precursors. Progressively in his work, the wry humour in his titles plays a subordinate role to the formal intervention in the design. Although he works within the conventions of assemblage art and, like Robert Klippel, wishes to impose a new and natural order, in the best works it is essentially a triumph of minimalist aesthetics with cold immaculate surfaces.

While perhaps not explicit, in his work I do see a comment on society. A comment consciously made from a position looking back at the period of modernism. It is a comment in which there is a hint of a sinister gothic side which lurks behind a high-gloss façade.

In another more recent series of smaller table sculptures, Vandermark plays with semiotic signs, where he re-uses lettering found in medium-density fireboard (MDF) and in other materials used as signage to spell out new words, frequently with poignant political meaning. In other instances he creates his own lettering in powder-coated aluminium or soldered bronze to mouth messages such as 'White Noise', 'Terror', 'Wall of Sound' and 'No Fucking Idea'. There is something absurd in the playful monumentality of these messages where we are admitted into a private iconography which at the same time appears as transparent and unambiguous in its meaning, yet simultaneously somewhat puzzling and confronting, like surrealist enigma. One to which Duchamp once said: "There is no solution because there is no problem."

Since he graduated from art school in 1989, Vandermark has established for himself a reputation as one of the most provocative, inventive, witty, cerebral yet challenging sculptors of his time. There is a refined elegance in his creations while beneath the immaculate façade there is a certain toughness tinged with the feeling of unease. While it is fashionable amongst a generation of younger sculptors to create objects which achieve a high level of fidelity to natural appearances in unusual materials, Vandermark is not primarily concerned with such 'oeil strategies'. In his work it is more important to seduce the eye then trick the mind into discovering a new and quite often troubling social reality.