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EUAN HENG ABRACADABRA PAINTINGS AND WATERCOLOURS 2000 - 2001

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AUSTRALIAN GALLERIES 2001

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E U A N H E N G

ABRACADABRA

PAINTINGS AND WATERCOLOURS

2000–2001

Rosemary Adam

Melbourne March 2001

Sydney June 2001



AUSTRALIAN GALLERIES

Euan Heng Paintings and Watercolours 2000–2001

First published in 2001 by
Australian Galleries Pty Ltd
35 Derby Street, Collingwood, Victoria 3066
15 Royston Street, Paddington, NSW 2021
in association with Euan Heng

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Design and production
Australian Art Publishing

Photography
Russell Mant, Melbourne

ISBN 0 9587643 7 9



This exhibition was assisted by
the Faculty of Art and Design, Monash University

Front cover
3 **Sleuth** 2000 oil on linen 137 x 132 cm

Back cover
9 **Face** 2000 oil on linen 91 x 86 cm

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ABRACADABRA

ROSEMARY ADAM

'Nature is a temple, in which living pillars sometimes utter a babel of words; man traverses it through forests of symbols, that watch him with knowing eyes.'

Baudelaire, 'Correspondences'

Euan Heng's new paintings are the consummation of work begun during his residency at the British School at Rome in the Spring of 1999. In Italy Heng pursued an intensive course of study and drawing based on his past enthusiasms for early Christian and antique frescoes, medieval mosaics and manuscripts, not forgetting Indian miniatures, which he had admired since his art school days.

Travelling further afield, he followed the 'trail' of Piero della Francesca to Arezzo, Monterchi, Sansepolcro and Perugia, and discovered a hitherto unknown to him source of inspiration in the ancient Etruscan tomb paintings at Tarquinia. Visual affinities were found also in mosaics at the Basilicas of San Clemente and Santa Prassede, Rome, and San Marco, Venice. In order to withstand the avalanche of visual images, Heng sought out bird, animal and plant iconography, adding new creatures to the bestiary which had long formed an intriguing component of his art. Thus the familiar figure of his male protagonist gained new companions on his intermittent journey of self-discovery, first signalled in the large, mixed-media paperworks Heng referred to as 'Riddles', and exhibited in Rome, then in Perth and Melbourne after his return. As he put it, 'With this chorus of voices I speculated on modes of representation as carriers of significance (both visual and contextual) and partial narrative structures that when harnessed to an individual vision and experience of the world would, I hoped, manifest in works with a poetic dimension'.

From these exploratory drawings evolved the watercolour studies and oil paintings here exhibited under the title 'Abracadabra': a word signifying a spell or magic formula, or, depending on the context, gibberish or mumbo-jumbo; worn as an amulet, it was used by Cabbalists to ward off agues, and it was a name of the Roman sun-god Mithras in pre-Christian times. Here it probably stands for a spell of the 'open sesame' kind. In the painting called *Abracadabra* (2000), a neatly dressed man resembling the artist bends over to pick up an enormous blue snail: a recurring symbol he derived from a tiny detail in the Apse

Mosaic at San Clemente and used to decorative effect in his previous exhibition. The pose is identical with that seen in *Beacon*, one of a series of watercolours done in 1998, in which a man stoops to warm his hands over an orange fire so small that it transforms him into a giant. The size of the snail in *Abracadabra*, however, makes the man appear dwarfish. His black hair, rosy flesh tints and pale, neutral-toned clothing are offset by a flat, blue-green background and a narrow strip of pink at the bottom of the canvas, indicating the basic division of land and sky (or sea): a luminous landscape described by D. H. Lawrence as he stood above the painted tombs of Tarquinia for the first time: 'The land dropped green and quick, to the strip of coast plain and the indistinct, faintly gleaming sea, which seemed somehow not like a sea at all.' (*Sketches of Etruscan Places*, 1927)



Detail from the Tomb of the Leopards, Tarquinia c. 475 BC

For the watercolour studies Heng used a standard square format and a decorative scheme based on the Tarquinian frescoes, in which painted figures disport themselves in the open air. To quote Lawrence: 'the ochre reds and blacks and blues and blue-greens are curiously alive and harmonious on the creamy yellow walls ... a beautiful colour for a background.' Each watercolour shows a single male figure engaged in some ambiguous activity on a narrow strip of pinkish ground against a pale yellow or blue sky, rendered in delicate, transparent washes. Shaded outlines inherited from Heng's mentor, Léger, separate figures from background and give

Euan Heng photographed by Polixeni Papapetrou, 2001

them limited substance, as in bas-relief. All the men have orange hair and skin of a paler tint, with features and hands also outlined in orange. They are the equivalents of the red-skinned Etruscans, but without their grace; stylistically they are more like the awkward figures in medieval mosaics, whose expressive gestures serve to animate the picture plane. For his cast of characters, Heng thoughtfully designed a simple but elegant costume (a preoccupation of his) of round-necked, long-sleeved shirts, straight trousers in contrasting colours, and grey shoes: as the saying goes, 'clothes maketh the man'.

Heng wants his paintings to have the simplicity and clarity of comic books or manuscripts, in which flat colour, bounding line and words are knit together to tell a story. The partial narratives he depicts are as provocative as riddling games, challenging his audience to find solutions; to this end his ironic titles provide clues. The oil painting *Sleuth*, 2000 for instance, shows a man shining a torch on a snail climbing a lopped and leafless tree. It is easy to interpret this image as the artist in his role as a detective, but the snail seems out of place on a dead tree: it is the antithesis of the Tree of Life that springs in luxuriant coils from the foot of Christ's Cross at the centre of the Apse Mosaic, San Clemente. The lopped tree is a motif frequently used by Heng (and also Léger) to symbolize a landscape blasted by industry. It occurred as early as 1983 in *Babel (Morwell Version)*, a biblical subject with a debt to Bruegel. In early Christian art the snail symbolized the sinner, because it was believed to have been born from mud, but the spiral form of its shell was also associated with the microcosmic spiral in matter, as seen in Egyptian hieroglyphs and Etruscan wall paintings. Like the torch, such evidence offers illumination: a word that also refers to the illustration of manuscripts (the plot thickens). Heng delights in this sort of investigation, which provides material for visual puns and titles, but he does not allow himself to become lost in the forest of symbols.

None of the above iconographic analysis prepares one for the brilliant colours in Heng's most recent series of oil paintings, of which *Sleuth 2000* is the first. The basic scheme is the same, but the colours are much stronger, like the rich primary hues in the mosaics of the Triumphal Arch at the Basilica of Santa Prassede, in which the figures of the elect are outlined in complementary colours and stand on a green band representing a grassy field. The *Sleuth's* hair is now red, as are the outlines of his pink shirt, which is worn with black trousers and dark blue shoes showing a glimpse of magenta socks – a reference to the coloured hose seen in early Renaissance frescoes; the blue snail, too, is Heng's 'little *hommage*

to Piero's lapis-lazuli-blue'. The yellow torch casts a beam of white light on to the snail and the deep cobalt tree-trunk with its black, shaded outlines, in contrast to the bright yellow sky (achieved by a mixture of Naples, cadmium and lemon yellows). In the related painting, *I Spy* (2001), a man shines a red torch on his dog, who is painted deepest blue—black. Apart from the reds and pinks, the picture is a symphony in green: the man's shirt is light turquoise, outlined in a deeper hue, with matching checked trousers (as worn by the storybook character, Rupert the Bear). Again there is a flash of magenta socks above the black shoes; the band of dark green in the foreground is echoed in a lighter green sea, which merges into a chartreuse sky at the horizon. An 'oriental' cloud formation in green and mauve hovers over a crescent moon haloed in yellow on the upper right.

The oriental flavour is picked up in other works, such as *Messenger 2000*, in which a man dressed in pink and black opens his arms to release a yellow-green parrot above misty grey hills separated by a strip of sea behind a green plain. Most of the characters in the series have a shifty look, but this one seems to court approval. In medieval Indian and Persian poetry, messages between parted lovers are often carried by birds, wind, clouds or stars. Because it can mimic human speech, the parrot is a messenger symbol, and like all birds, it symbolizes the human soul. As told by the Persian poet Attar in *The Conference of the Birds* (c.1250 AD), the Parrot arrives 'dressed in a garment of green, and round her neck a collar of gold. The hawk is but a gnat beside her brilliance; earth's green carpet is the reflection of her feathers, and her words are distilled sugar. Listen to her: "Vile men whose hearts are iron have shut me in a cage, so charming am I. Held fast in this prison I long for the source of the water of immortality...".'

By contrast, the hapless individual in *Air-o-Plane* (2001) attempts to fly of his own volition. Lurching forward on one foot with arms outstretched behind him, the black-haired, dwarfish man turns his head to see if anyone is watching. His face and hands are outlined in orange, his orange jacket in red, and his yellow trousers have soft, black outlines. The sky is painted brilliant Naples yellow. Apart from the usual strip of green ground and a segment of magenta sock, the picture is ablaze with yellow, like the sun. Above all, it is through his daring use of colour that Euan Heng achieves a richly poetic art.

Rosemary Adam
20 March 2001



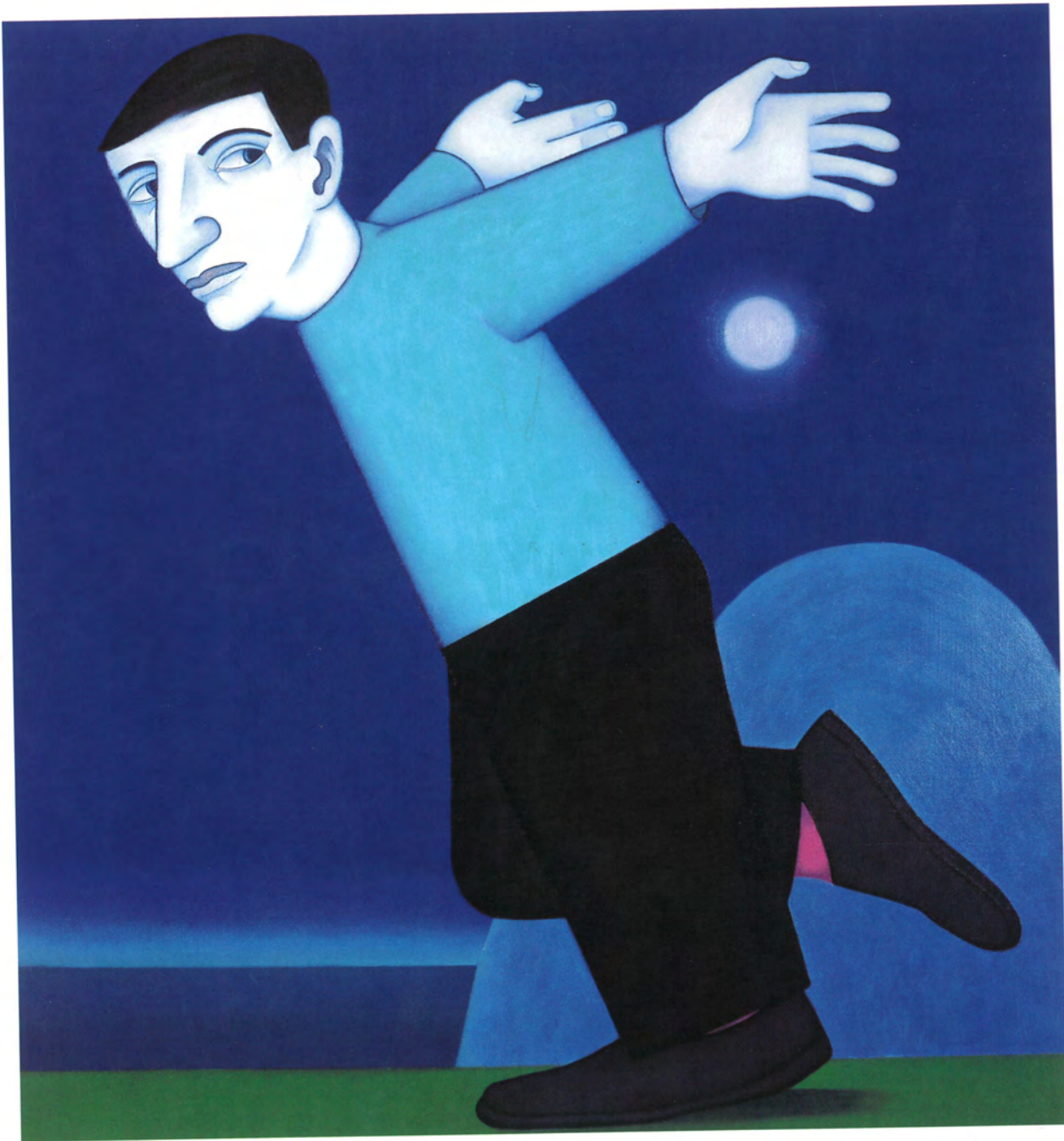
7 Abracadabra 2000 oil on linen 91 x 91 cm



4 Messenger 2000 oil on linen 137 x 132 cm



2 I Spy 2001 oil on linen 137 x 132 cm



8 Night flight 2001 oil on linen 91 x 86 cm



1 Air-o-Plane 2001 oil on linen 137 x 132 cm



5 Gladiator 2000 oil on linen 137 x 132 cm



6 Passage 2000 oil on linen 102 x 102 cm



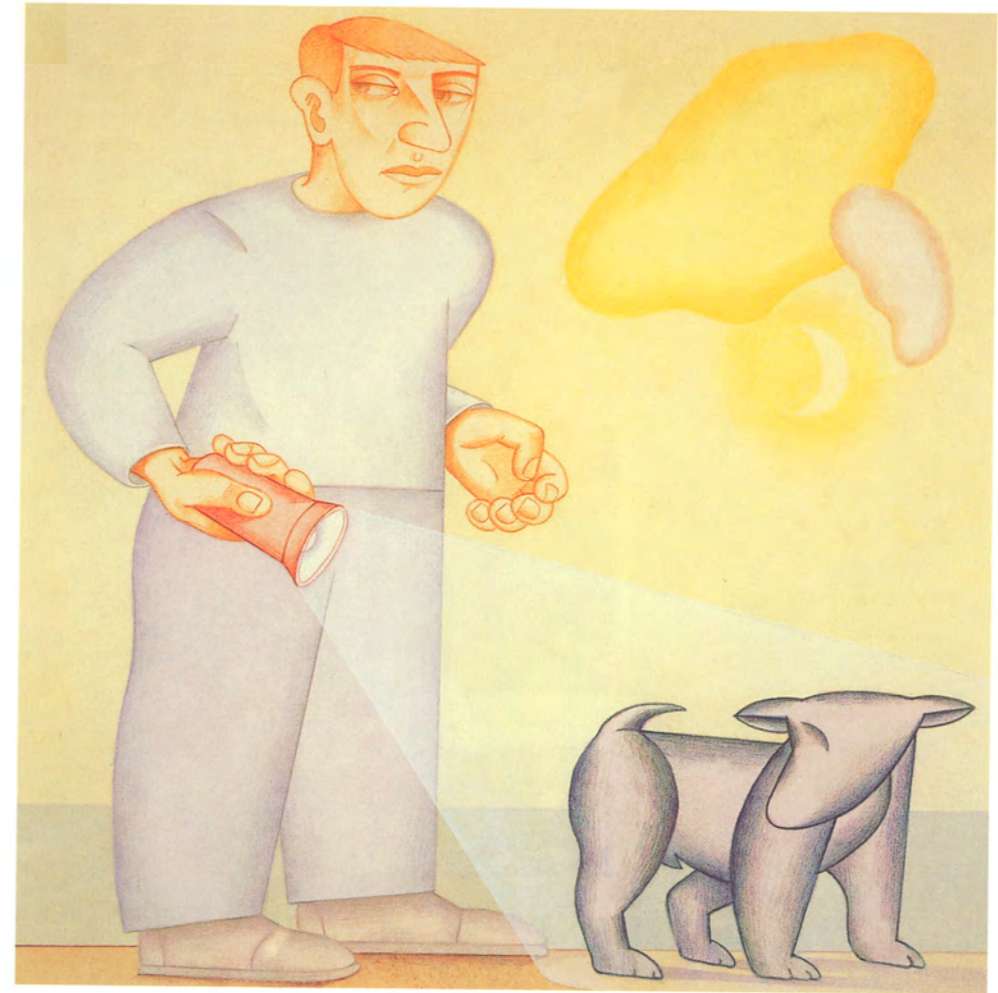
14 Sleuth 2000 watercolour 35 x 35 cm



12 Snoop 2000 watercolour 35 x 35 cm



15 Messenger 2000 watercolour 35 x 35 cm



13 I spy 2000 watercolour 35 x 35 cm



16 Gladiator 2000 watercolour 35 x 35 cm



11 Air-o-Plane 2001 watercolour 35 x 35 cm



10 Talisman 2001 watercolour 72 x 52 cm

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

- 1945 Born in Oban, Argyshire, Scotland
 1970 – 75 Diploma and Post Diploma of Art,
 Duncan of Jordanstone College of Art, Dundee, Scotland
 1995 Master of Arts (Research), Royal Melbourne Institute
 of Technology
 1995 – Associate Professor in Fine Art (part time),
 Faculty of Art and Design, Monash University, Caulfield Campus

SOLO EXHIBITIONS

- 1974 'Prints', Stirling Gallery, Stirling, Scotland
 1976 'Paintings and Prints', Stirling Gallery, Stirling, Scotland
 1979 'Paintings and Prints', Arts Council Gallery, Canberra
 1980 'Paintings and Prints', Editions Gallery, Melbourne
 1984 'Paintings and Prints', Australian Galleries, Melbourne
 1985 'Paintings and Drawings', Australian Galleries, Melbourne
 1987 'Drawings', Switchback Gallery, Gippsland Institute of
 Advanced Education, Churchill, Victoria
 'Survey of Selected Work (1977 to 1987)',
 Latrobe Regional Gallery, Morwell, Victoria
 1988 'Paintings, Watercolours and Drawings',
 70 Arden Street Gallery, Melbourne
 1989 'Paintings', 70 Arden Street Gallery, Melbourne
 1990 'Watercolours', Australian Galleries, Melbourne
 1991 'Cycle', Latrobe Regional Gallery, Morwell, Victoria
 1992 'Paintings and Watercolours', Australian Galleries,
 Melbourne and Sydney
 'Paintings and Watercolours', Greenhill Galleries, Perth
 1995 'Studio Notes', McClelland Art Gallery, Langwarrin, Victoria
 'Paintings and Prints', Australian Galleries, Melbourne
 1996 'Works on Paper', Greenhill Galleries, Perth
 1997 'Recent Works on Paper', Australian Galleries, Melbourne
 1999 'Work in Progress', British School at Rome, Italy
 2000 'Another Riddle', Greenhill Galleries and Perth International
 Arts Festival, Perth
 'Graffiti', Project Space (wall drawing), Faculty Gallery,
 Faculty of Art and Design, Monash University, Caulfield Campus
 'Watercolours and Drawings', Australian Galleries Works on Paper,
 Melbourne
 2001 'Abracadabra', Australian Galleries, Melbourne and Sydney

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 1990 'Modern and Contemporary Australian Watercolours and Gouaches',
 John Buckley Fine Art, Melbourne
 'Contemporary Gippsland Artists', Latrobe Regional Gallery, Morwell,
 Victoria, and touring
 1991 'Indo-Echo', Linden Gallery, Melbourne
 'At-Tension to the Line (Australian Drawing)', Greenhill Galleries, Perth
 'Transitional Times', APW Gallery, Melbourne, and touring
 1992 'Recently Seen', McClelland Art Gallery, Langwarrin, Victoria
 1993 'Excalibur', Geelong Art Gallery, Victoria
 1994 'Mixed Impressions', Ivan Dougherty Gallery, University of NSW,
 Sydney
 'Watercolour Exhibition by the Artists of ROC, USA & Australia',
 Chung Cheng Gallery, Taiwan Art Education Institute, Taipei
 'Margaret Stewart Endowment', National Gallery of Victoria,
 Melbourne
 1995 'Migration - Enriching Australia 1945-1995', Australian National
 Maritime Museum, Sydney
 1996 'Blake Prize for Religious Art', State Library of NSW, Sydney
 'Call of the Wild', New Parliament House, Canberra
 'Australian Printmaking in the 1990s', APW Gallery, Melbourne

- 1997 'Knock Knock', Australian Galleries, Melbourne
 'Figurative Forces', Latrobe Regional Gallery, Morwell, Victoria
 1998 'Notations', Victoria University Gallery, Melbourne
 'Orientations', New Parliament House, Canberra
 'Gone to the Dogs', Grahame Galleries + Editions, Brisbane
 'From the Block', Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane
 'Metamorphosis', Mornington Peninsula Regional Gallery,
 Mornington, Victoria
 'Primary Colours - Blue', Annandale Galleries, Sydney
 'Magic Realism', Australian Galleries, Melbourne
 'Decalogue', Metropolitan Museum of Seoul, Korea
 'Recent Acquisitions', National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne
 1999 'Pleasure', Australian Galleries, Melbourne
 'Cabinet Works', Compass Gallery, Glasgow
 2000 'Cutting Comments - Contemporary Linocuts, 1995-1998',
 NETS, Victoria
 'Reciprocal Moves', Warrnambool Art Gallery, Victoria
 'People in a Landscape: Contemporary Australian Prints',
 Cultural Centre of the Philippines, Manila, and touring Taiwan,
 China and Singapore
 'Liberty', RMIT Gallery, Melbourne
 'Small Tapestries', Victorian Tapestry Workshop, Melbourne
 'Australian Identities in Printmaking', Wagga Wagga Regional
 Gallery, NSW
 'Workings of the Mind: Melbourne Prints 1960s to the 1990s',
 QUT Art Museum, Brisbane, and touring

GRANTS

- 1999 Australia Council Residency, British School at Rome, Italy

PUBLIC COLLECTIONS

National/State

- Art Bank, Sydney
 Australian Print Workshop Archives, Melbourne
 National Gallery of Australia, Canberra
 National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne
 New Parliament House Collection, Canberra
 Print Council of Australia Archives, Melbourne
 Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane
 State Library of Victoria, Melbourne
 Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery, Hobart

Regional

- Ballarat Fine Art Gallery, Vic.
 Bathurst Art Gallery, NSW
 Bendigo Art Gallery, Vic.
 City of Whitehorse Collection, Vic.
 Gippsland Regional Art Gallery, Sale, Vic.
 Geelong Art Gallery, Vic.
 Gladstone Art Gallery, Qld
 Latrobe Regional Gallery, Morwell, Vic.
 McClelland Art Gallery, Vic.
 Mildura Art Centre, Vic.
 Mornington Peninsula Art Centre, Vic.
 Naracoorte Art Gallery, SA
 New England Regional Museum, NSW
 Queen Victoria Museum and Art Gallery, Tas.
 Wagga Wagga Regional Gallery, NSW
 Warrnambool Art Gallery, Vic.

Educational Institutions

Aquinas College, Melbourne
Ballarat University, Vic.
Box Hill College of TAFE, Vic.
Charles Sturt University, NSW
Griffith University, Brisbane
Institute for the Arts, ANU, Canberra
Lawrence Wilson Gallery, University of WA, Perth
Methodist Ladies College, Melbourne
Monash University, Faculty of Art and Design, Vic.
Queensland University of Technology, Brisbane
RMIT University, Melbourne
University of Southern Queensland

Scotland

Scottish Arts Council Collection, Edinburgh

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

Books

Alan McCulloch, revised and updated by Susan McCulloch,
The Encyclopaedia of Australian Art, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1994
Sasha Grishin, *Australian Printmaking in the 1990s*, Artist Printmakers,
1990 to 1995, Craftsman House, Sydney, 1996
Gary Catalano, *Building a Picture: Interviews with Australian Artists*,
McGraw-Hill, Sydney, 1997

Catalogues

Betty Clarke, *Seven Painters: Different View Point*,
University of Melbourne, June 1983
David Thorp, *Euan Heng*, Australian Galleries, Melbourne, 1984
Christopher Coventry, *The Style is the Man*, Latrobe Valley Arts Centre,
Morwell, May 1987
David Hansen, *Contemporary Gippsland Artists*, Latrobe Valley Arts
Centre, Morwell, June 1990
Rosemary Adam, *Cycle*, Latrobe Valley Arts Centre, Morwell, October 1991
Rodney Scherer and David Hansen, *Indo-Eco*, Latrobe Valley Arts
Centre, Morwell, April 1991
Ann Carew, *Excalibur*, Geelong Art Gallery, March 1993
Gary Catalano, *Euan Heng*, Australian Galleries, Melbourne, May 1995
Deborah Hart, *Call of the Wild*, Parliament House Art Collection,
February 1996
Kirsty Grant, *Cutting Comments - Contemporary Linocuts 1995-1998*,
NETS, Victoria, 2000
Sasha Grishin, *Australian Identities in Printmaking*, Australian Print
Collection of the Wagga Wagga Regional Gallery, 2000
Stephen Rainbird, *Workings of the Mind: Melbourne Prints 1960s
to the 1990s*, QUT Art Museum, Brisbane, 2000
Rosemary Adam, *Abracadabra*, Australian Galleries,
Melbourne and Sydney, 2001

Journals

Rosemary Adam, 'Euan Heng', *Art and Australia*, vol. 27/1, Spring, 1989
Gary Catalano, 'Something Here: an interview with Euan Heng',
Art Monthly Australia, no. 55, November 1992
Peter Hill, 'Euan Heng', *Asian Art News*, vol. 4, no. 4, July/August 1994
Robert Nelson, 'Euan Heng and the archaeology of the modern',
Imprint, vol. 30, no. 2, Winter, 1995
Sheriden Palmer, 'Euan Heng: The Landscape of Art - an artist's tale',
Imprint, vol. 32, no. 3, Spring, 1997
Roger Taylor, 'Euan Heng at Australian Galleries', *Asian Art News*,
vol. 10, no. 3, May/June 2000

Newspapers

Emilio Coia, 'Pictures and private enterprise', *Glasgow Herald*,
September 1974
Edward Gage, 'Art Gallery', *Scotsman*, September 1974
William Ferguson, 'Art' *Times Educational Supplement: Scotland*,
October 1974
Juliet Clough, 'Art', *Times Educational Supplement: Scotland*, December 1975
William Ferguson, 'Permod winners on show', *Times Educational Supplement:
Scotland*, 1976
Allan McCulloch, 'Surprises from our past', *Herald*, Melbourne,
November 1980
Robert Rooney, 'Realism all but forgotten', *Weekend Australian*,
June 1983
Rod Carmichael, 'The look of real things', *Sun*, Melbourne, June 1983
Jeannie Heynatz, 'Individual look at industry', *Latrobe Valley Express*,
July 1987
Robert Rooney, 'Once an Englishman', *Weekend Australian*, April 1988
Gary Catalano, 'When construction is the key', *Age*, April 1988
Gary Catalano, 'Heng's deep emotional resonances', *Age*,
September 1989
Gary Catalano, 'Blake questions today's artists', *Age*, December 1989
Peter Hill, 'Rich narrative behind Heng imagery', *Age*, September 1990
Louise Dauth, 'Hard questions' *Artlink*, vol. 12, no. 2, 1992
Christopher Heathcote, 'Lucid stirring pictures that linger in the mind',
Age, June 1992
Bronwyn Watson, 'Surrealists with attitude', *Sydney Morning Herald*,
28 June 1992
Christine France, 'Dark expressions of self-alienation', *Weekend
Australian*, August 1992
Christopher Heathcote, 'Unassuming pictures from an alcove at
an imaginary exhibition', *Age*, 3 September 1992
David Bromfield, 'On show', *West Australian*, 26 September 1992
Christopher Heathcote, 'Imagined worlds provide the inspiration for a
new movement', *Age*, 9 December 1992
Christopher Heathcote, 'Lighthearted paintings and sculpture get year
into gear', *Age*, 3 February 1993
Robert Rooney, 'Melbourne Art', *Australian*, 11 August 1995
Robert Nelson, 'Cool sympathies in a bleak landscape', *Age*,
August 1995
Robert Nelson, 'Modern art for modern life's sake', *Age*, 11 June 1997
Sasha Grishin, 'Elegant, intimate little exhibition', *Canberra Times*,
7 February 1998
Robert Rooney, 'Magic realism tour waiting to take you away',
Australian, 14 August 1998
Peter Timms, 'Not all magic in this realism', *Age*, 12 August 1998
David Bromfield, 'Arts Review', *West Australian*, 5/6 February, 2000
Anna Clabburn, 'Inspired artists push the parameters', *Australian*,
14 April 2000
Peter Timms, 'Tell-tale signs of Renaissance Italy', *Age*, 19 April 2000
Robert Nelson, 'Seeing is believing', *Age*, 24 November 2000
Anna Clabburn, 'Trappings of success', *Australian*, 17 November 2000



17 Stray 2001 watercolour 23.8 x 24 cm

LIST OF WORKS

PAINTINGS

	TITLE	DATE	MEDIUM	SIZE IN CM
1	Air-o-Plane	2001	oil on linen	137 x 132
2	I Spy	2001	oil on linen	137 x 132
3	Sleuth	2000	oil on linen	137 x 132
4	Messenger	2000	oil on linen	137 x 132
5	Gladiator	2000	oil on linen	137 x 132
6	Passage	2000	oil on linen	102 x 102
7	Abacadabra	2000	oil on linen	91 x 91
8	Night flight	2001	oil on linen	91 x 86
9	Face	2000	oil on linen	91 x 86

WATERCOLOURS

	TITLE	DATE	MEDIUM	SIZE
10	Talisman	2001	watercolour	72 x 52
11	Air-o-Plane	2001	watercolour	35 x 35
12	Snoop	2000	watercolour	35 x 35
13	I Spy	2000	watercolour	35 x 35
14	Sleuth	2000	watercolour	35 x 35
15	Messenger	2000	watercolour	35 x 35
16	Gladiator	2000	watercolour	35 x 35
17	Stray	2001	watercolour	23.8 x 24

All works illustrated. All works inscribed verso. Measurements depth x width (unframed)