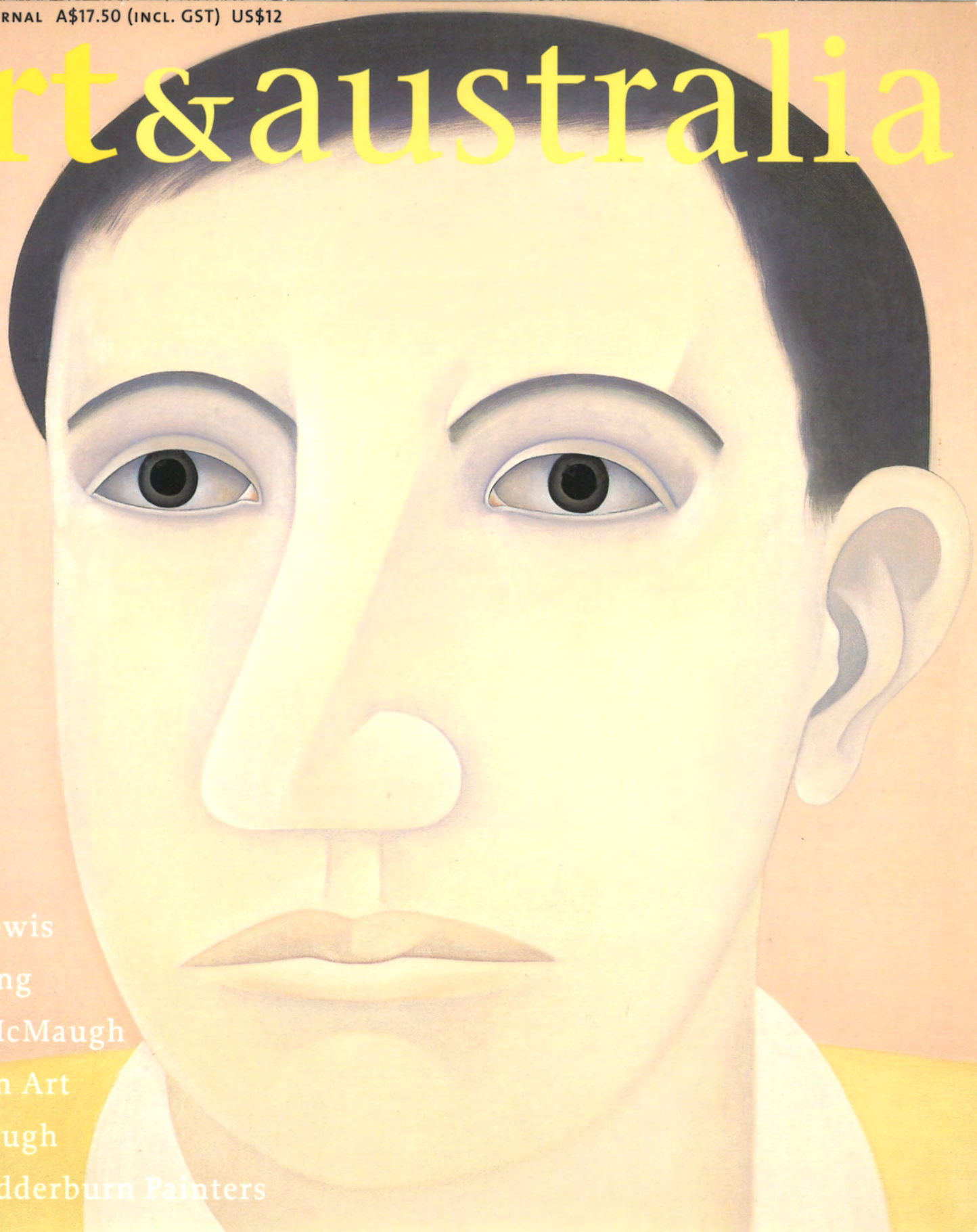


QUARTERLY JOURNAL A\$17.50 (INCL. GST) US\$12

art & australia



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Euan Heng

Alison McMaugh

Colour in Art

Craig Gough

Four Wedderburn Painters

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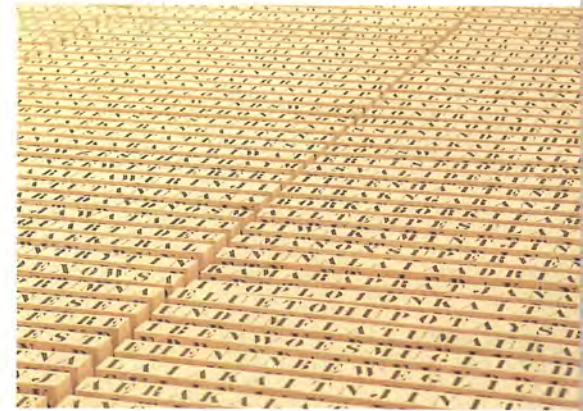
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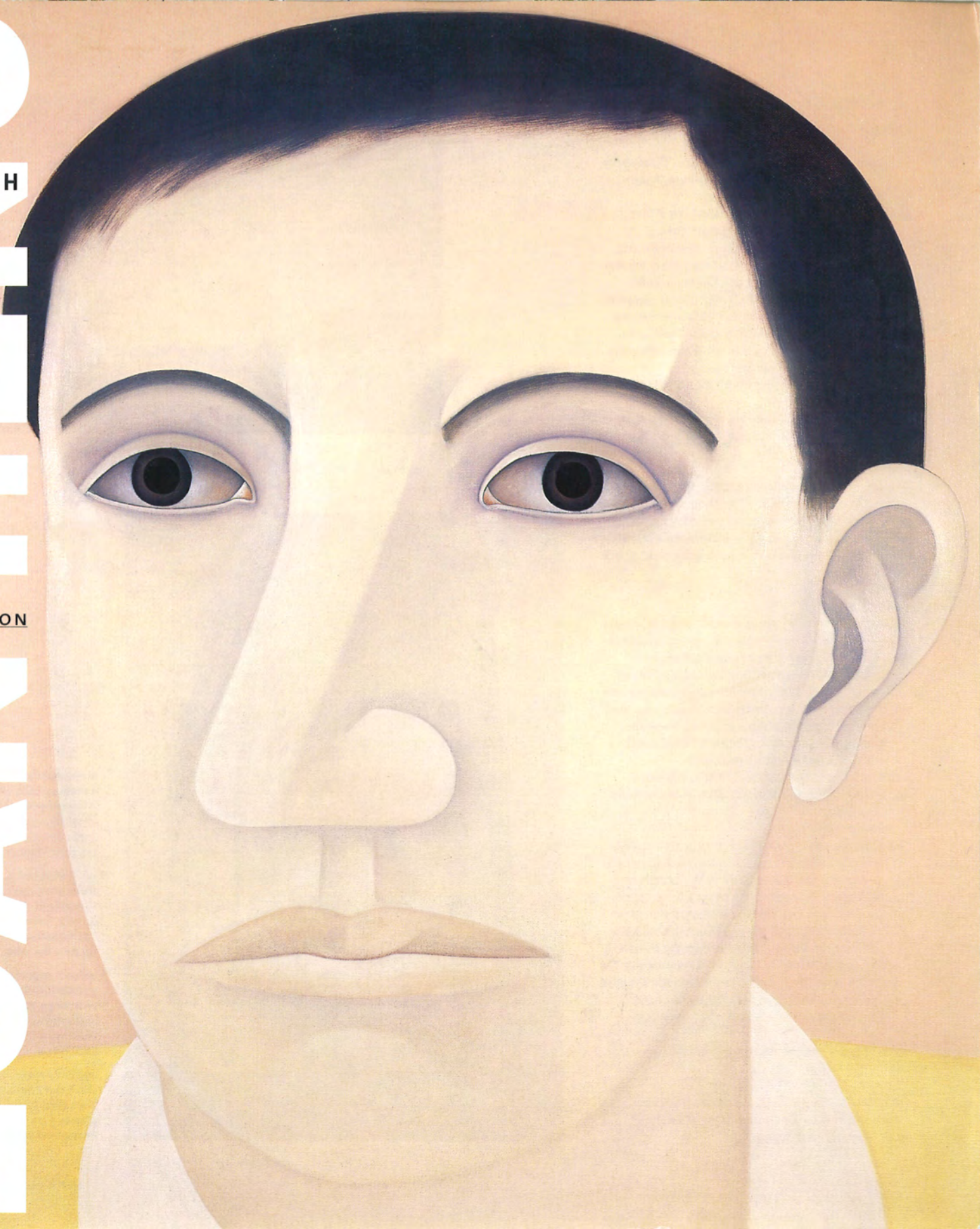
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HENG'S FIGURE COLLIDES WITH A DRIFTING WORLD OF SYMBOLIC OBJECTS WHOSE MEANINGS ARE UNSTABLE, OSCILLATING BETWEEN MYSTIFICATION AND A SENSE OF LOSS.

Uan Heng's artistic vision is well characterised by the title of one of his recent works, *Sleuth*, 2000, for he is a detective in his search for meaning in a multitude of places, from Byzantine icons to popular comic books.¹ Quirky, anti-didactic and mesmerising, these watercolours and oil paintings record the seduction and after-effects of his encounter with Italian art and the layered iconographies of the Mediterranean world. Against the tough background of earlier works set in Gippsland's dark industrial landscape and his own Glaswegian origins, they represent an emergence into bright light, saturated colour and airiness of space. A new iconography, too, emerges to replace the vulnerability and harshness of his past concerns. It is a perplexing world that both encourages and defies interpretation. Heng, the magician, conjures up a series of riddles in narrative mode featuring a figure of cartoon physiognomy and quattrocento demeanour.

Blending the wit of popular culture and the gravity of renaissance art, the protagonist is, of course, the artist himself.

There can be little doubt about the identification. The almond eyes, the wide slice of the mouth, the pointed nose and the uncannily neat hair are all manifestly those of the artist (as evident in Polixeni Papapetrou's photograph for the 2001 Australian Galleries exhibition catalogue). It does not matter that in the works his hair turns orangey-red, or that the monumental head in the recent exhibition is entitled merely *Face*, 2000. Indeed, this ambiguity and evasion is characteristic of current complexities in the depiction of self.² By imposing distance Heng denies explicit self-expression. For him, as for

Henri Matisse, expression is in the whole picture. His self-portrait insists on calm detachment, on the facial surface being as much if not more the subject than inner emotions. In fact Heng describes the work as a composite portrait, mixing a memory of his youthful self with that of his brother. While the head fills the entire space to the edges, the eyes are averted. The effect is of massive scale, a kind of puppet head of Constantine, a fragment from a colossal Roman sculpture.

In the post-Italian narrative works this powerful but ambiguous identity translates into a self-contained, oddly mobile force, doll-like or robotic. Heng betrays no explicit autobiographical impulse. Instead, an abstracted account of his features restricts access and blocks interpretation. He creates a persona with power to act but rejects any hint of a confessional personality cult. With the stylish charisma of René Magritte's man in a bowler hat and the wistful resilience of Charlie Chaplain, he appears in rigid profile or static three-quarter view. In poses of almost noble perplexity he attains a power to act that is impressive and at times magical.

The unusual inflection in Heng's features, inherited from his Chinese grandfather, contributes to the impact of the image. Other artists have managed the same – Paul Gauguin, for example, who played up his own inherited Peruvian characteristics in search of an aggressive exoticism that would add to his avant-garde status.³ Heng makes no postcolonial comment. His synthesis of western and eastern aesthetic traditions is seamless, another trick executed with a Matisse-like fluency. His penchant for the ornamental, for the flat surface and linearity, enforced by an ability to let colour sing, are all testimony to his blended genealogy and an early fascination with Indian art instilled by Philip Rawson,



above: EUAN HENG, *Air-o-plane*, 2001, oil on linen, 137 x 132 cm, private collection. Photograph Russell Mant.

opposite page: EUAN HENG, *Passage*, 2000, oil on linen, 102 x 102 cm, courtesy Australian Galleries. Photograph Russell Mant.

previous page 262: EUAN HENG, *Face*, 2000, oil on linen, 96 x 91 cm, courtesy Australian Galleries. Photograph Russell Mant.

previous page 263: EUAN HENG, *Sleuth*, 2000, oil on linen, 137 x 132 cm, private collection. Photograph Russell Mant.



above: EUAN HENG, *Abracadabra*, 2000, oil on linen, 91 x 91 cm, private collection. Photograph Russell Mant.
opposite page: EUAN HENG, *Anthology*, 1999, mixed media on paper, 101 x 137 cm, private collection. Photograph Claudio Abate.

a visiting scholar at Dundee School of Art, where Heng studied.

These complex visual habits converge in a ritualistic depiction of curiosity. As the traveller who never arrives, Heng's journey turns into an investigation, an existential whodunit, and the search becomes the central subject of his art. While his activities are minor, they are invested with unusual significance. In *Sleuth* he stands opposite a curiously branched, half-lopped tree, both man and tree like columns holding up the picture space. In a moment of obscure iconography his quizzical and bewildered figure shines a triangle of torchlight at a snail. The lopped tree, bright as coral under the sea, appears magically to regenerate.

There are perils to be faced on the journey. A ship sinks (*Passage*, 2000; *Anthology*, 1999), a cloud is portentous as it lugs across a pale sky (*I spy*, 2001), a moon eerily keeps watch (*Night flight*, 2001). Against these background symbols Heng focuses on iconic moments: the open arc of arms that encircle and encage the bird even as it is set free in *Messenger*, 2000; the torchlight shone on snail or dog in *Sleuth*, *Snoop*, 2000, and *I spy*; the arms flung back like wings in *Night flight* and *Air-o-plane*, 2001; and the *largesse* of the bent-over figure reaching for a snail in *Abracadabra*, 2000. The weight of these images fuses intimate personal psychologies of release, curiosity, flight and tenderness with recognised symbols for states of transition, if not spiritual transformation.

Heng's figure collides with a drifting world of symbolic objects whose meanings are unstable, oscillating between mystification and a sense of loss. Sorting out this mix is his task, his heroic journey. The result is a deliberate excess of symbolic meaning. This intentional overload is evident in *Anthology*, a watercolour produced during his Australia Council residency



at the British School of Rome in 1999. Audaciously, he raids icons from the past for images. The result is a faux naive catalogue of paradise imagery. Floating in the decorative space of a medieval tapestry or manuscript, the bizarre collection includes a deer with a saint riding in its antlers, from a medieval low-relief wood sculpture; a snail taken from the Basilica of San Clemente, chased by a partridge from a Vatican tapestry; an inverted renaissance tree; a Byzantine icon cloudscape; and a dolphin from a Roman floor-mosaic.⁴ In the midst of all this is a modern machine, the cartoon-like image of a sinking ship, tipped up almost vertically and slipping into the sea. The resplendent scene is inter-

rupted by a sign of death, made more disturbing by its reference to the artist as a merchant seaman.

Does this cornucopian melee of meaning cancel itself out with contradictions or has Heng managed to reinvent meaning in the very superabundance of motifs? Certainly with *Anthology* and its major follow-up, the triptych *Riddle*, 1999, he stored away an eccentric cache of symbols to be revisited. Thus he can move with unusual confidence between ancient symbol and personal memorabilia. In *Talisman*, 2001, the Good Shepherd carrying the Lamb becomes the artist dressed in a nifty suit, wrapped around with a hare and attended by his own dog, Oscar. There is no spoof in this appropriation, and no self-conscious collage. Heng sheds cultural baggage whenever necessary and recycles both meaning and image with poignant effect.

Riddle attempts this on a monumental



EUAN HENG, *Riddle*, 1999, mixed media on paper, 3 panels, each 100 x 70 cm, private collection. Photograph V. France.

scale. As such, its cartoon-like linearity invokes the original function of renaissance cartoons, full-scale drawings to be directly transferred to the wall in fresco painting. A mixed-media work on paper, brought back to be finished in Australia, the work is a triptych, the form and size of renaissance altarpieces. A continuous horizon line joins the three panels. The central figure, like an ancient Egyptian in a suit, presides over all three sections while carrying a talismanic caged owl. Inquisitive animals and birds bob up around paired Etruscan-style trees. Secreted behind the figure, like a clue in a puzzle, is a blue snail, its spiral shell evocative of primitive life forms. All these creatures are inscribed with the musical calligraphy of a jewel-coloured line against a fresh white ground, recapturing some of the lyrical festivity Heng observed in Etruscan frescoes.

After his immersion in large-scale wall-painting and decoration, Heng's works on return to Australia have the effect of a continuous narrative inventing an entire world with intimations of moral significance, like a modern-day Arena Chapel by Giotto. Certainly the influence of other quattrocento luminaries such as Piero della Francesca, Fra Angelico and Ambrogio Lorenzetti is evident in the stiff but measured movement of the figures and the narrow stage-like space; in nearly every work the hero's shoes almost fuse with the ground plane as they slide along. *Abracadabra* evokes Fra Angelico's San Marco cells in its simplicity, chalky

fresco-like tones and bold gesture towards a source of mysterious inspiration, the snail. The massive hands reach down in an austere and exaggerated choreography of reverence.

Heng's fluency in the language of past art is essential to his engagement with contemporary aesthetic values.⁵ His decorative instincts are both medieval and modern, his comic-book outline combines renaissance *disegno*, popular print, and Fernand Léger. His dialogue with the past sharpens the role of his art to manipulate reality, to move between abstraction, representation and the experience of the real, in ways habitual to art now. With a deadpan elegance reminiscent of Patrick Caulfield, whom Heng acknowledges as an influence, he plays on the medium and its potential to analyse, mimic or reinvent available visual signifiers. The diagrammatically

outlined birdcage in *Riddle* is an abstract, not a real, imposition on the softly feathered, three-dimensional owl inside. In *Passage*, 2000, the cartoon ship-image reappears to dip headlong into a painterly sea framed by a cut-out silhouette tree in the foreground. The result is not postmodern collage, rather a meshing of images into poetic reverie. The tree stands like a sentinel, gloomily witnessing the sinking, while the motif of the sad little ship shifts into fairytale mode and the dreamy moon and sky vaporise the tragedy into hazy atmosphere.

This slippage between genres is further heightened in Heng's concern to repeat motifs in different media. The compositions of *I spy*, *Navigation*, *Sleuth*, *Messenger*, *Air-o-plane* and *Gladiator*, 2000, are all almost exactly repeated in both watercolour and oil. The watercolours are delicate, like apparitions softly imprinted on the paper. In oil the bizarre vulnerability of *Air-o-plane* acquires a more aggressive energy. The outlines are reinforced, space is reduced to a running strip along the bottom, and colour is volted up to charge the image to its full dynamism – billiard-table green against a field of blazing yellow. In an added variation Heng reverses the image to its night-time opposite; the same figure that in the watercolour appeared to falter and in the oil was poised to take off, now appears to flee, haunted by the darkening midnight-blue sky. Heng draws on the figure reversal characteristic of renaissance works such as della Francesca's reversed angels in the *Madonna del Parto*, 1460–65, at Monterchi. In other works, such as *Abracadabra*, the pale tones of the bending figure have the opaque chalkiness of fresco painting while the snail has an oily glow. In dislodging his figure and objects from a continuous, unified mode of representation, Heng declares their artifice,



EUAN HENG, *Formality and fun*, 2002, watercolour, 21 x 17 cm, courtesy Australian Galleries. Photograph Jenni Carter.

forcing them to participate in the arena of modern cultural disjunctions.

Heng's most recent work aspires, with a new intensity, to the condition of poetry. His desire, as he puts it, is to 'empty out' the works, paring down the profusion of props in his symbolic theatre. A tree, both monumental and delicate, has a microcosmic status. Entitled *Formality and fun*, 2002, it obviously relates to the pastoral paradise of the Italian works but clips them into more concentrated form, influenced by landscape-gardening catalogues and practices. The tree is another sentinel, evocative, as a symbol in topiary, of fortitude, with connotations that run back to related motifs throughout Heng's oeuvre.

Heng revisits his own past motifs just as he pillages the motifs of past art. Like other

iconographers who have influenced him (William Blake, Magritte, Carlo Carrà, Léger), his images have developed into a language of their own. With post-surrealist condensation this works to invest his subjects with an archetypal quality. Memory informs the present in ways that are uncanny, playful and dislocating. Heng, the sleuth and magician, investigates the murder of meaning in modern art and, in the process of his enquiry, manages to bring some of it back to life. The repeated image of the storybook boat that tips up into the sea is a modern *memento mori*, a lament for art itself as much as for life. Yet Heng contains it within an enclosed world. Despite indications of a suppressed disturbance, explicit violence is shut out and the artist insists on restraint. The viewer can rely on that control to provide answers to the question: How can images and forms continue to create meaning in art today?

- 1 I wish to thank Ross Moore, Claudio Bozzi and Euan Heng for discussions in relation to this article.
- 2 As Ernst van Alphen writes: 'The project of "portraying somebody in her/his individual originality or quality of essence" has come to an end.' See his essay, 'The portrait's dispersal: Concepts of representation and subjectivity in contemporary portraiture', in Joanna Woodall (ed.), *Portraiture: Facing the Subject*, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1997, p. 254.
- 3 See G. Wildenstein (ed.), *Gauguin: Sa Vie, Son Oeuvre, Arbre Genealogique*, Paris, 1958, pp. 6–7.
- 4 See Rosemary Adam, *Euan Heng: Abracadabra – Paintings and Watercolours 2000–2001*, Australian Galleries, Melbourne, 2001, for further discussion of the sources of these symbols.
- 5 Compare the view of Peter Timms, 'Tell-tale signs of Renaissance Italy', *Age*, 19 April 2000. See also Charles Green, 'Euan Heng, Australian Galleries', *Art Forum International*, vol. 40, no. 2, October 2001, p. 170; Richard Morphet (ed.), *Encounters: New Art from Old*, National Gallery, London, 2000; and Laura Morris (ed.), *Modern Art Despite Modernism*, Museum of Modern Art, New York, 2000.

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