EUAN HENG

CYCLE
Selected Paintings and Works on Paper

Latrobe Valley Arts Centre
October 24 - November 24, 1991
THOSE who have watched the evolution of Euan Heng’s art since he came to live in Gippsland in 1982 will be familiar with the Latrobe Valley settings against which his cartoon-like characters enact private rituals. In the new work exhibited here, however, factories and industrial detritus have been swept away, leaving solitary male figures in contemplation of a dreamlike coastline, or (as in the charcoal drawings), occupying even more ambiguous spaces.

Though Heng sometimes puts himself in his pictures, none of these characters appears to be a self-portrait (except in the sense of Everyman). All are workers of one kind or another: descendants of his earlier Char Man (1983 Coll LVAC) and Worker (1986-87). Their attitudes and the objects they hold indicate their roles in life, while their stylish clothes and shoes proclaim their modernity. This, in turn, underlines Heng’s continuing commitment to Modernism.

Heng has given his new series of drawings and paintings the generic title Cycle: a word alluding to his perennial theme of love, death and salvation. On a more mundane level, it is connected with movement, vehicular transport, journeys and completion. And, amusingly, if an exclamation mark is added, it becomes a command. Multi-layered meanings such as these can be found in the transitional painting, Hitch-Hiker. This character looks like the Char Man but holds the Worker’s ladder - a recurring symbol of Heng’s - which has changed from yellow to blue.

He turns his back on a box-like house or shelter containing a flight of stairs. The yellow suitcase standing next to him probably holds his tools of trade, or may refer to intellectual baggage. Clearly, the Hitch Hiker is setting out on a journey; the blue ladder propped against empty air suggests that this journey will be a spiritual one.

There is nothing superfluous in Heng’s pictures. This is most noticeable in the drawings, in which formal inventiveness is pushed to extremes. In the study for Encounter, a timber-cutter thoughtfully slices into a log with a chainsaw; judging by the monolithic treestumps ranged behind him, he might have levelled a whole forest. A hazy sun echoes the shape of the man’s bald head and emphasizes the circularity of the tight-knit composition.

But nothing is quite as it seems to be. There is more visual punning in the related watercolour, Limb, where the same man, dressed in red, carries a log resembling blood-stained flesh. In the study for Magician, he is seen nailing crates together for some obscure purpose; moreover, there is something supernatural about the way the sun hovers between hammer and box opening. Heng’s interest in Vorticism (particularly the art of William Roberts) is evident in the expressive distortion of the figures: observe the air of satisfaction with which the Engineer in another study bends forward to scoop up the toy train at his feet. And in Roman Holiday, the body of a kneeling carpenter is deformed into a squat S-shape as he prepares to hit the end of a plank with his sledgehammer. Behind him a hill and the base of an upright post hint that he could be an agent of the Crucifixion.

If the drawings are full of arrested movement, the oil paintings emanate stillness. Their increasingly religious
tone reflects Heng's preoccupation with the art and life of Sir Stanley Spencer, the metaphysical paintings of Giorgio de Chirico, and certain works by Florentine masters of the Quattrocento. This is no facile mannerism, nor are the paintings merely allegorical in content, for Heng's figures and symbols are allowed to emerge, not forced, into consciousness.

Like the knights-errant in the medieval Quest of the Holy Grail, Heng's surrogate selves make halting progress towards their goal through a series of trials and encounters. Emma Jung (who relieved her husband C.G. Jung of the task of analysing the Grail Legend) has explained that "The Quest presents us with different types of humanity at varying degrees of spiritual development." Heng's fascination with this marvellous cycle of tales, and the bluntness of its telling, adds depth to his imagery. This is evident above all in his use of symbolic colours: a rich, cardinal red, rose pinks and warm yellows, complemented by green and a gamut of blues. It is by the skilful deployment of these hues that the artist's vision is enabled to take flight.

Hence in Pilot, a man in a red suit clasps a toy plane of the same colour; behind him a pale blue sky may be seen through an open window. There is a joking reference here to a 'sky pilot' or minister, but this magisterial person resembles nothing so much as the painted figure of a saint, holding his appropriate attribute and compressed into the narrow side-panel of an altarpiece. The Aviator also holds a red toy plane. He is seated rather awkwardly on a grassy slope overlooking a seashore. His suit is opalescent white, like the indeterminate zone where sea meets sky.

A single cypress tree occupies the left side of the picture and penetrates the heavens, where the sun is half-hidden by rosy clouds. This is the closest Heng has come to painting a landscape, in this case a dreamy Arcadian scene which is in tune with the man's inward gaze. Red plane and evergreen tree are paired opposites, like male and female, or life and death (the cypress symbolizes both funerals and eternity).

A mood of profound contemplation suffuses the painting called Metaphysician. Its horizontal shape is dictated by the reclining figure of yet another red-suited man, posed like the central figure in Piero di Cosimo's Death of Procris (c.1490, National gallery, London), and cradling a toy train-engine. He, too, lies close to a beach where a turquoise sea is lost in a turquoise sky, streaked with blood-red clouds. Title and engine link this picture with De Chirico, but the mood is serene rather than melancholy. It is reminiscent, too, of paintings of Saints Anthony and Jerome meditating in the wilderness, red being the colour of the robes they traditionally wear. In which case the Toy could symbolize temptation or vanitas, the ephemeral nature of worldly achievement. Through its association with blood, the colour red symbolizes life, love, sublimation and death. Heng's modern knights-errant seem to be contemplating these mysteries.

Rosemary Adam, September 1991

Rosemary Adam is a Lecturer in Art Theory in the School of Visual and Performing Arts at Charles Sturt University, NSW.

EUAN HENG
1945    Born Oban, Scotland
1960-69  Merchant Seaman and various other occupations
1970-75  Diploma and Post Diploma study at Duncan of Jordanstone College of Art, Dundee, Scotland
1991-current Masters Degree Candidate by Research, RMIT, Melbourne
1977    Arrived Australia

Solo Exhibitions
1974    Prints, Stirling Gallery, Stirling, UK
1976    Paintings, Prints, Stirling Gallery, UK
1979    Paintings, Prints and Drawings, Arts Council Gallery, Canberra, ACT
1984    Paintings, Prints, Australian Galleries, Melbourne, Victoria
1985    Paintings, Drawings, Australian Galleries, Melbourne, Victoria
1987    Euan Heng (Survey of Selected Works), 1977-1987, Paintings, Prints, and Drawings, Latrobe Valley Arts Centre, Morwell, Victoria
1988    Paintings and Drawings, 70 Arden Street Gallery, Melbourne, Victoria
1989    Paintings and Works on Paper, 70 Arden Street Gallery, Melbourne, Victoria
1990    Watercolours, Australian Galleries, Melbourne, Victoria
1991    Cycle, Paintings and Works on Paper, Latrobe Valley Arts Centre, Morwell, Victoria

Group Exhibitions
1973    International Print Exchange, Compass Gallery, Scotland, Montpellier Ecole Des Beaux Arts, Illinois State University, and Duncan of Jordanstone College of Art
1974    Scottish Young Contemporaries, McLellan Galleries, Glasgow
1975    Trees, Stirling Gallery, Stirling, UK
1976    Pernod Scottish Art, Art Centre, Edinburgh
1977    Ten Years, Dundee Young Painters, Dundee Museum and Art Gallery, Dundee
1983    Seven Painters Different View Points, University of Melbourne Art Gallery, Melbourne
1983    International Print Exhibit; 1983, Republic of China, Taipei City Museum, Taiwan, China

[Continued overleaf]
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Other activities of the Artist include teaching in the United Kingdom and Australia. Currently Senior Lecturer, School of Visual Arts, Monash University College Gippsland

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