EUAN HENG
ABRACADABRA
PAINTINGS AND WATERCOLOURS
2000—2001

Rosemary Adam

Melbourne March 2001
Sydney June 2001

AUSTRALIAN GALLERIES
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."

— Bundelair, '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 enthusiasm for early Christian and antique frescoes, medieval mosaics and manuscripts, not forgetting Roman miniatures, which he had admired since his art school days.

Travelling farther afield, he followed the 'trail' of Piero della Francesca to Arezzo, Montecchi, Sansepolcro and Perugia, and discovered a hermit 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 he referred to as 'Riddles', and exhibited in Rome, then in Perth and Melbourne after his return. As he put it, 'With this chous 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; soon as an amulet, it was used by Cabalists to ward off aqves, 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 Byzantium, one of a series of watercolours done in 1999, 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, rusty flesh tints and pale, neutral-toned clothing are offset by a flat, blue-green background and a narrow strip of pink or 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 glistening sea, which seemed somehow not like a sea at all.' (Sketches of Ecceom Itanes, 1927)

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, Leight, 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 paller 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 riddles, challenging his audience to find solutions to this end and his ironic titles provide clues. The oil painting Sleuth, 2000 for instance, shows a man shining a torch on a still climbing a lopped and leafless tree. It is easy to interpret this image as the artist in his role as a detective, but the small 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 Ligert) to symbolise a landscape blighted by industry. It occurred as early as 1993 in Raft (Manwell Vennin), a biblical subject with a debt to Burne. In early Christian art the small symbolised 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 thickness).

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 di San Zeno Paredes, 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 homage to Piero's lapis lazuli blue. The yellow torch casts a beam of white light on to the snail and the deep cobalt trelliswork 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 deep blue—black. Apart from the red and blue, 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 flush 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 chasseresque 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 this series have a shifty look, but this one seems to court approval. In medieval Indian and Persian poems, 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 symbolises 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 goat beside her brilliance; earth's green carpet is the reflection of her feathers, and her words are distilled sugar. Listen to her: "We 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 by 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 Air-o-Plane 2000 oil on linen 91 x 91 cm
5. *Gallina* 2000. oil on linen. 137 x 132 cm

6. *Passage* 2000. oil on linen. 102 x 102 cm
BIographical NOTES
1945 Born in Oban, Argyllshire, Scotland
1957-59 Diploma and Post-Diploma Studies in Ceramics, Edinburgh College of Art, Scotland
1960 Bachelor of Arts (Honours), Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology
1995 Associate Professor in Fine Art (part time), Faculty of Art and Design, Monash University, Caulfield Campus

SOLO EXHIBITIONS
1978 'Prints', Shirley Gallery, Stirling, Scotland
1978 'Prints and Prints', Shirley Gallery, Stirling, Scotland
1979 'Prints and Prints', Arts Council Gallery, Canterbury
1980 'Prints and Prints', Edinburgh Gallery, Melbourne
1984 'Prints and Prints', Australian Galleries, Melbourne
1987 'Prints and Drawings', Australian Galleries, Melbourne
1997 Survey of Scottish Work (1977 to 1987), Lambera Regional Gallery, Morwell, Victoria
1988 Paintings, Watercolours and Drawings, 70 Arthur Street Gallery, Melbourne
1989 Paintings, 70 Arthur Street Gallery, Melbourne
1990 'Watercolour', Australian Galleries, Melbourne
1991 'Lambert', Lambera Regional Gallery, Morwell, Victoria
1992 'Paintings and Watercolours', Australian Galleries, Melbourne and Sydney
1995 'Paintings and Watercolours', Greenhill Galleries, Perth
1995 'Studio Note', McCullagh Art Gallery, Launceston, Victoria
1995 'Prints 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 Art Festival, Perth
2001 'Curate', Project Space (small drawing), Faculty Gallery, Faculty of Art and Design, Monash University, Caulfield Campus
2001 'Watercolours and Drawings', Australian Galleries Works on Paper, Melbourne
2001 'Anniversary', Australian Galleries, Melbourne and Sydney

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS
1950 'Modern and Contemporary Australian Watercolours and Drawings', John Buckley Fine Art, Melbourne
1966 'Contemporary Australian Artists', Lambera Regional Gallery, Morwell, Victoria, and touring
1991 'Style Echoes', Linden Gallery, Melbourne
1991 'Art Therapies in the Line (Australian Drawing)', Greenhill Galleries, Perth
1992 'Artefacts of Time', APW Gallery, Melbourne, and touring
1992 'Recently Seen', McCullagh Art Gallery, Launceston, Victoria
1993 'Facetlite', Geelong Art Gallery, Victoria
1994 'Museum Impressions', Joan Doughtery Galleries, University of NSW, Sydney

"Watercolours Exhibition by the Artists of the Royal NZ Academy, Australia, Austria, America and Belgium", National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne
1996 'Blake Prize for Religious Art', State Library of NSW, Sydney
1999 'Call of the Wild, New Parliament House, Canberra
2000 'Australian Printmaking in the 1980s', APW Gallery, Melbourne
2001 'Kosciusko Knock', Australian Galleries, Melbourne
2006 'Nurnberg, Victoria University Gallery, Melbourne
2007 'Chattering', New Parliament House, Canberra
2007 'Close to the Dog', O'mahony Galleries + Edison, Brisbane
2007 'From the Block', Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane
2008 'Architects', Australian Galleries, Melbourne
2008 'Recent Acquisitions', National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne
2008 'Petronio', Australian Galleries, Melbourne
2008 'Caliber Works', Compaq Gallery, Glasgow
2009 'Current Contests - Contemporary Environments, 1965-1985', SNTB, Victoria
2009 'Reciprocal Move', Warwomah Art Gallery, Victoria
2010 'People in a Landscape, Contemporary Australian Painters', Cultural Centre of the Philillippines, Manila, and touring Taiwan, China and Singapore
2010 'Library', NMJ Gallery, Melbourne
2010 'Small Terrors, Victoria Tattersall Workshop, Melbourne
2010 'Australian Identities in Printmaking', Wagga Wagga Regional Gallery, NSW
2010 'Rerouting of the Mind: Melbourne Trans 1960s to the 1990s', QUT Art Museum, Brisbane, and touring

GRANTS
1999 Australian Council Residency, British School at Rome, Italy

PUBLIC COLLECTIONS
Noted States
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
Belgrave Fine Art Gallery, VIC
Bathurst Art Gallery, NSW
Brisbane Art Gallery, VIC
City of Whittlesea Collection, VIC
Gippsland Regional Art Gallery, Sale, VIC
Geelong Art Gallery, VIC
Gladstone Art Gallery, Qld
Lambert Regional Gallery, Morwell, VIC
McCullagh Art Gallery, QLD
Midlands Art Centre, VIC
Mornington Peninsula Art Centre, VIC
Naracoorte Art Gallery, SA
New England Regional Museums, NSW
Queen Victoria Museum and Art Gallery, Tas.
Wagga Wagga Regional Gallery, NSW
Warrnambool Art Gallery, VIC

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# LIST OF WORKS

## PAINTINGS

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<tr>
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<td>2001</td>
<td>oil on linen</td>
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## WATERCOLOURS

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