

***The Window and the Door Feb- March 2011 Perth Galleries***

Artists Prompting Creative Capacity by Dr Phillip McNamara

Is art a pursuit of meaning or a strategy? Is it a logic done with clarity and precision, or a Dada like anything goes play with material and appearance? How do artists both gain an audience and stay committed to artistic exploration and self expression? Eventually what brings capacity and coherence to art making? Ideas about creativity and the complexities of interpretation suggest that the art object arises more out of chance and dynamic ambiguities than a pre-determined meaning, nevertheless concepts and stylistic frameworks can provide both structure and on-going inspiration to an artist's practice.



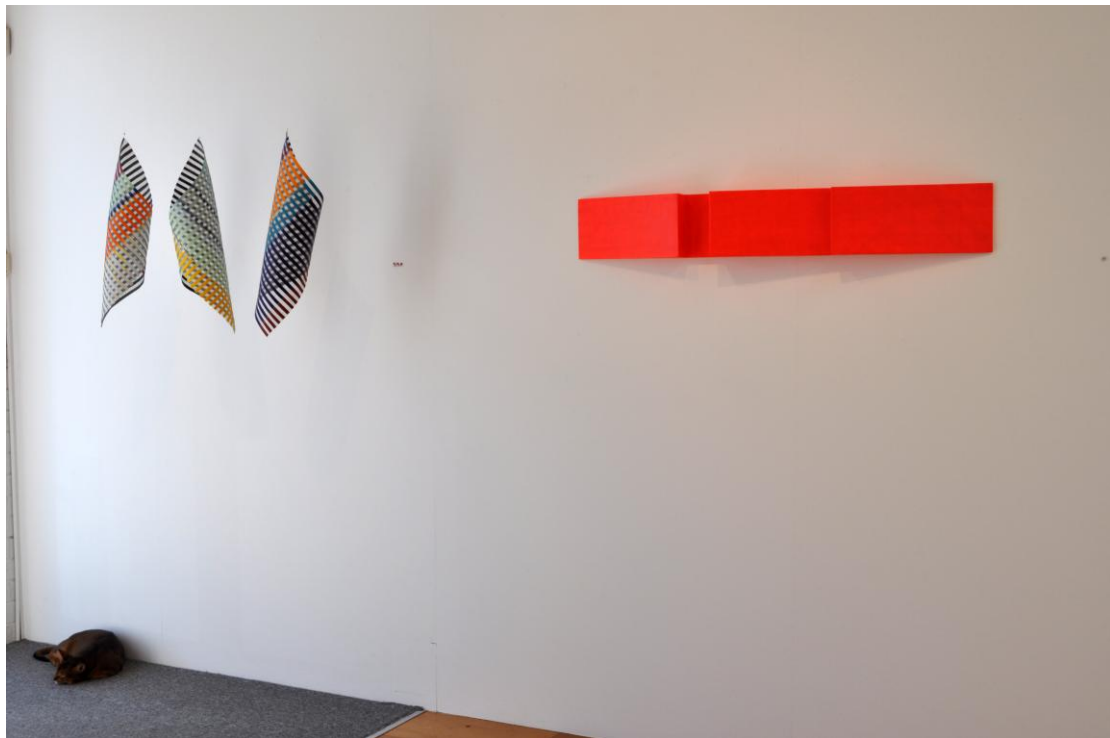
*'The Window and the Door'. Perth Galleries Feb 2011 Installation view,*

Imagine 'the window and the door' as a metaphor for the meeting point or dividing line between the outside world of objects and the inner world of creative experience. Like doors or windows, an art object divides the inner world of the artist's mind from the outer 'reality', while at the same time uniting the two. Art becomes – through a viewers' conscious focus on it – the alchemical vessel where "outer" and "inner" transform first into forms and appearances, then into meaning.

For an exhibition entitled **the Window and the Door**, held at Perth Galleries, artists Carol Wells and Penny Coss challenged artists to address such questions by sending them a short

musings on *Alice Through the Looking Glass*.<sup>1</sup> The invitation to each of the 9 artists, though more poetic than prescriptive, was to conceptually and practically “throw themselves out there”.<sup>2</sup>

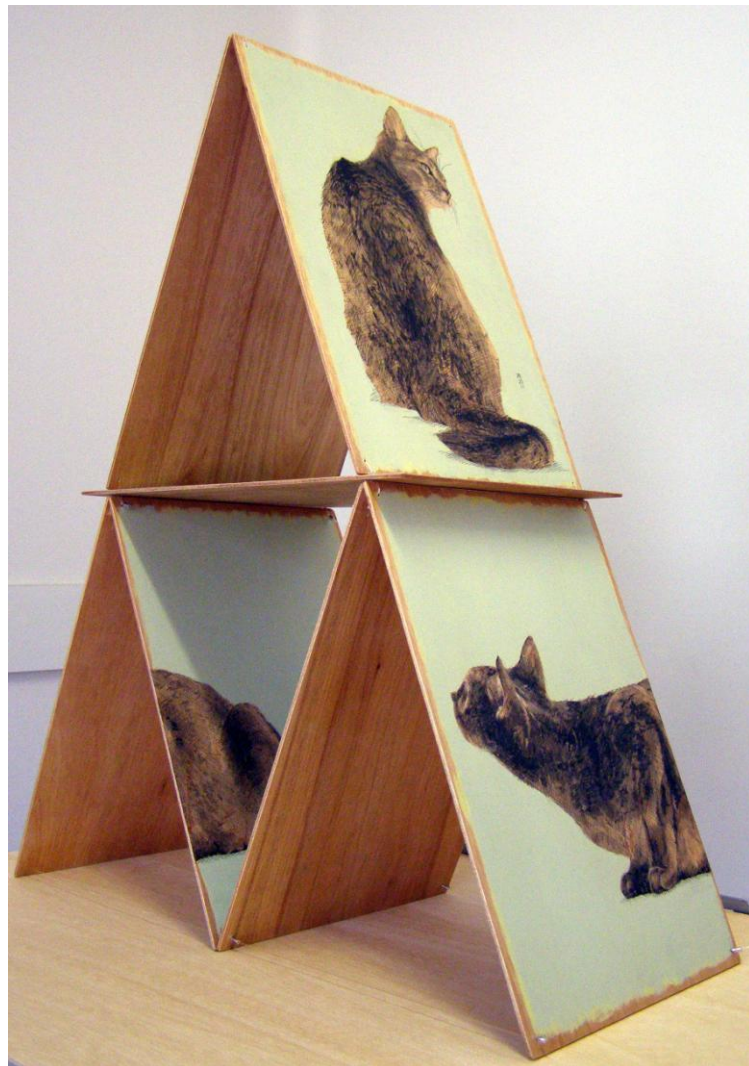
The force of attraction one has towards an art work is usually because of its gravitas, which is its appearance or exertion of artistic ‘seriousness’. If one treats the idea of the door or window as a symbol of entrance or access to the mind’s gravitas (inner creative experience), several keys can be distinguished for reading how the exhibiting artists dealt with the idea of art as a causal vehicle constructed to exert attraction or interaction (to signify). As I moved through the exhibition I noted several core ideas - from works depicting material nature, through works dealing with the built environment and the physical body, to works interested in the realm of weather and archetypal forms, to those formed around ideas of mathematical measurement. As a whole, the resulting exhibition became a juxtaposition of different media and styles, raising questions of abstraction, representation, originality and why an artist becomes dedicated to making art both within a particular medium and within a range of stylistic (and recognisable) moves.



*'The Window and the Door'. Perth Galleries Feb 2011 Installation view,*

The artist whose works straddled several of these were the mixed media on ply by Judy Rogers. Two of her works were reliquaries; containers for relics of saints. Rogers painted on each side of a box like structure pictures of hands in various gestures. Recalling the Medieval practice of the hands of Saints being kept in reliquaries, so as to be paraded once a year around the town they had performed their miracles in, her realistic renditions of disembodied hands floated against sky blue and were more like the clouds of heaven which signify the

veils obscuring love and truth than anything which could disperse good deeds. These works made me ponder the positive and negative aspects of all action and how individual expression, including the reproducing talents of every artist, is inseparably connected to our hands.



Roger's tower of assembled ply cards titled 'Cats' was possibly the most ritualistic looking work in the show. Beautifully made, the cards forming the triangle roof structure featured realistic looking renditions of cats in various poses. One could look at the cat images singly, as a sequence, or a group. Above Judy Rogers 'Cats' painted wood and ply panel, 2011.

The peaked structure could be read as a house but also a monolith or cenotaph, so ultimately a difficult object to investigate because it was neither a painting nor a sculpture. I've built plenty of such card towers as a youngster, always frustrated that something that looked so materially sturdy could topple at the slightest movement, but these cats looked rather at ease. Various responses to art were generated: stiff artifice and a house of cards; surface as visual, tactile and structural information; internal images as lurking and numinous or as potential threads of theatrical melodrama danger; and the work as parasite specific homage to the Perth Gallery resident cats.



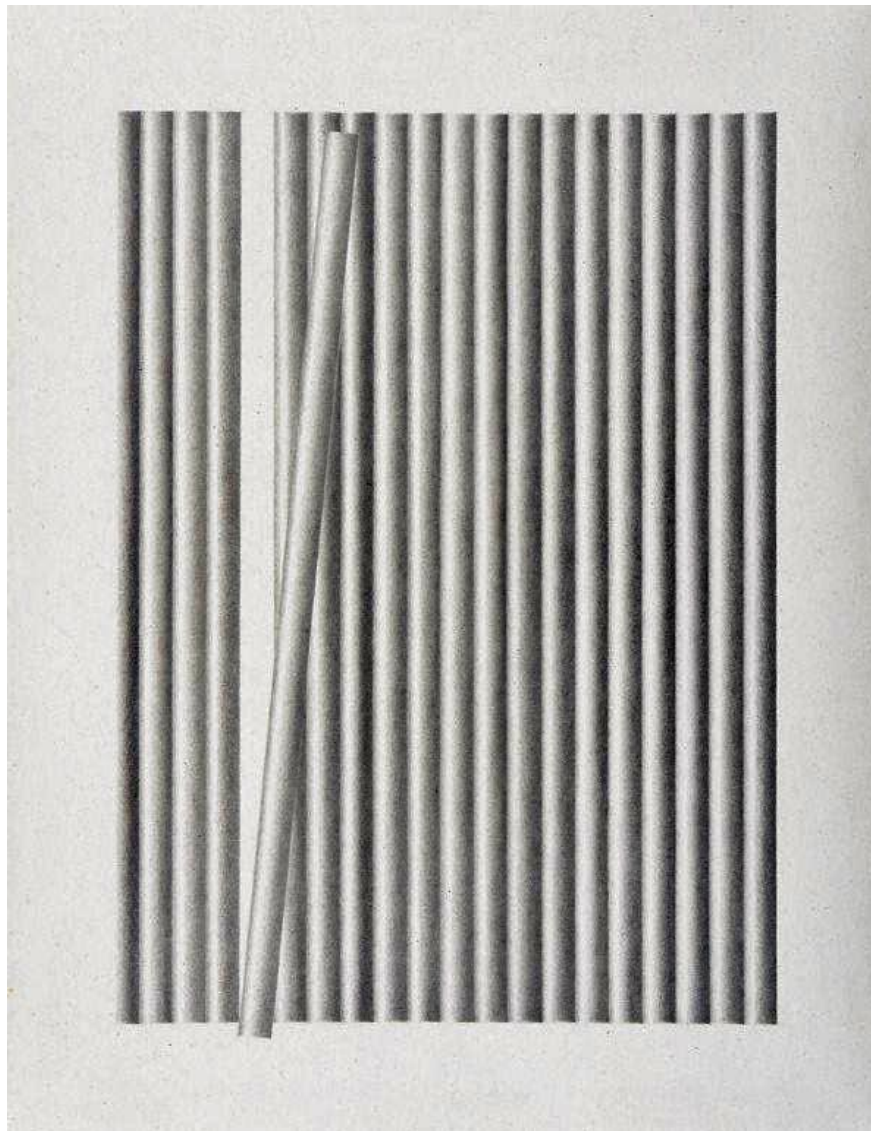
Judy Rogers 'Reliquary' wood and paint 2011

Another artist who extended yet kept within the principles of his usual practice was R J Dorizzi. He exhibited only two works. One (titled *Debarred*) was a 2D pencil drawing from 2009, which indicated his meticulous technique of rendering volume and geometric order through shading, while the other was his response to the show, a 3D chromed steel relief (*Bas-Relief*). The humour in making a 3D subversion of his own practice was perhaps missed by hanging his contributions so far apart. However if one looked at the dates and noted the mediums there was much to delight in making comparisons.



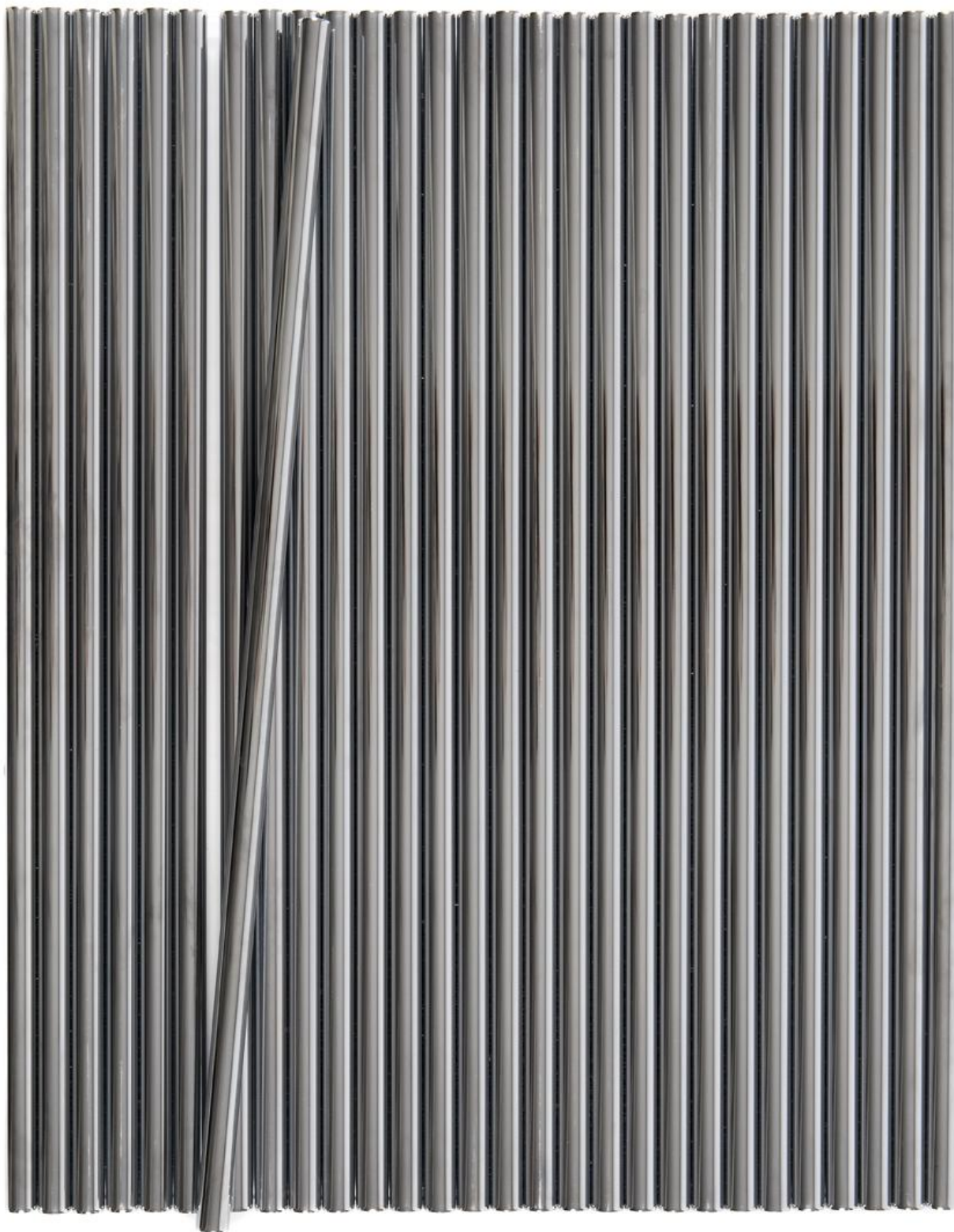
Installation

view, Window and the Door



Robert Dorizzi "Debarred" 78 x 62cm (framed) Pencil on paper.

Dorizzi handles the material nature of pencil shading with aplomb. His drawn bars or cylinders take on a mesmerising physical presence. It's the shading of form, but also partly because of the grand eloquence of their (almost exhausting) repetition and partly because of their mathematical harmony, that they command notice. Indeed a double look at his drawings and paintings is always required. So it is not incidental then that his contribution to *the Window & the Door* is a 'going through' his own rendering to become a relief object. However the relief itself was presented in a perspex box which, hanging from the gallery wall, kept the chrome steel bars mainly on a flat plane and curving just slightly against each other. The tour de force of this sculpture is that one chrome tube tilts up and across its surrounding bars, gently



Robert Dorizzi Bas- Relief 2011 Chromed steel on Perspex 92 x 72 cm

breaking the rhythmic pattern and making the viewer realize the work is in fact a construction. The inherently reflective chrome adds to the sense of slow rising and falling. It quietly breathed.

Likewise, the work of Giles Hohnen on the opposite wall to the work just described, also projected gentle movement; two aluminium sculptural works through movement of light and literally being propped out from the wall, and two paintings through interplay of colour and shape. The larger painting – *20011 # 1 (Road Picture)* - with its seven lozenges of multi overlaid rickety strokes of yellow umber tiered against a broad wattle yellow ground, established an atmosphere of both (semi-arid) spatial expanse and organic patterns and processes far more atmospheric than its means. The other used painterly frames within the picture frame curved to one end in the manner of a car side window; combining painterly marks that seemed to suggest abstractionists as diverse as Hodgkins, Firth-Smith and Rothko. In oil on aluminium and suggestive of the fields or auras and eclipses of trees glimpsed from a moving car window, it also formed an interesting network of brush pulling, pushing and pauses which acted as counterpoint to the more minimal oil on cut aluminium sculptural 'strokes' which were hung like witty but dry paraphrases of Lichtenstein's Pop brushstrokes.

Giles Hohnen *2011 # 1 (Road Picture)* oil on canvas



Cut from corrugated aluminium and mounted to cast shadows, these sculptural works bring into question the paradoxes of 2D and 3D perspective. Indeed the sculptures were less architecturally defined than the forms and space of Hohnen's paintings (whose eloquence comes from them looking patiently layered yet spontaneous, technical yet meditative). I viewed these alternating flat then chunky brushstrokes from a number of angles and was left pondering is there a point at which perspective creates atmosphere?



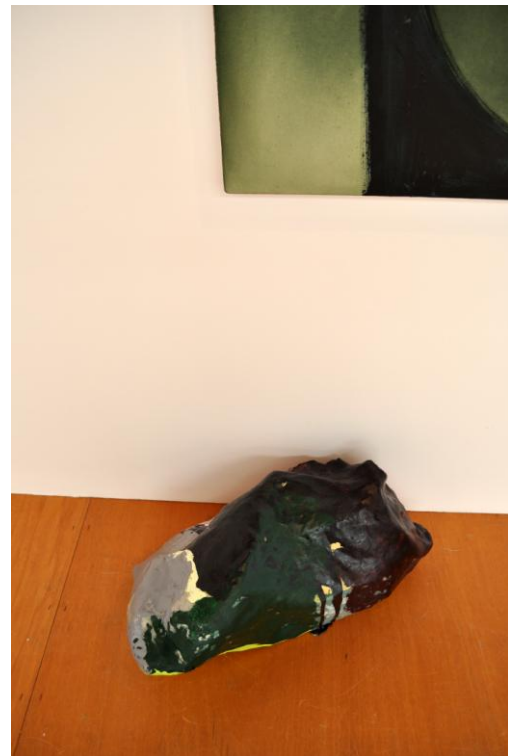
Giles Hohnen 2011 *Two Strokes (yellow)* 70 x 90 cm oil on aluminium



Previous page Giles Hohnen 2011 *Road Picture #2* 30 x 54 cm oil on aluminium

Another artist, whose work raised questions about atmosphere and the playfulness of colour and medium, was Penny Coss who took the idea of the artists pushing their mediums into its fullest metaphoric and expressive capabilities. Coss provided a baroque counterpoint to the geometric and systems orientated structures of the majority. Biomorphic and gestalt forms, familiar in her paintings, pushed off the canvas into sculpture to become idiosyncratic biological substances partly rock and partly breathing.

The topography of the sculptural surfaces were painted in such a way that their literal depths and structures took on illusory shifts via buoyant yellows, greens, mauves, pinks. One work, painted so that the underneath lateral space appeared to occupy less volume than the bulbous upper part, had both a monolithic immobility and a seeming weightlessness.



Biology, botany, geology with oblique references to energy and landscape systems in nature - where evoked by her works. There was almost irreverence to some of Coss's application from juxtapositions of lush lurid colours to counter intuitive or incongruous underpainting - which keeps the surfaces sensual and visual rather than laden with apocalyptic overtones; a

(Above L- R ) Penny Coss Kangaroo Paw 2011 oil on wood, Newton's Fall 2011 fiberglass

direction her use of dark tones could turn if the application became too weighty. Additionally the large painting *Dark Matter* with its compelling jelly fish like form hovering across green and blue prisms yearned to envelop the viewer or cause quite mayhem beyond its borders.

Accordingly the sculptures brought into focus the 3D possibilities of Coss's gestures. With her works occupying a corner of the gallery I wanted a video or accompanying soundtrack to extend what could become almost a science fiction vision. Walking amongst her works I realized response to landscape is situational.

(Below) Penny Coss *Dark Matter* 2011, acrylic on canvas 130 x 152 cm

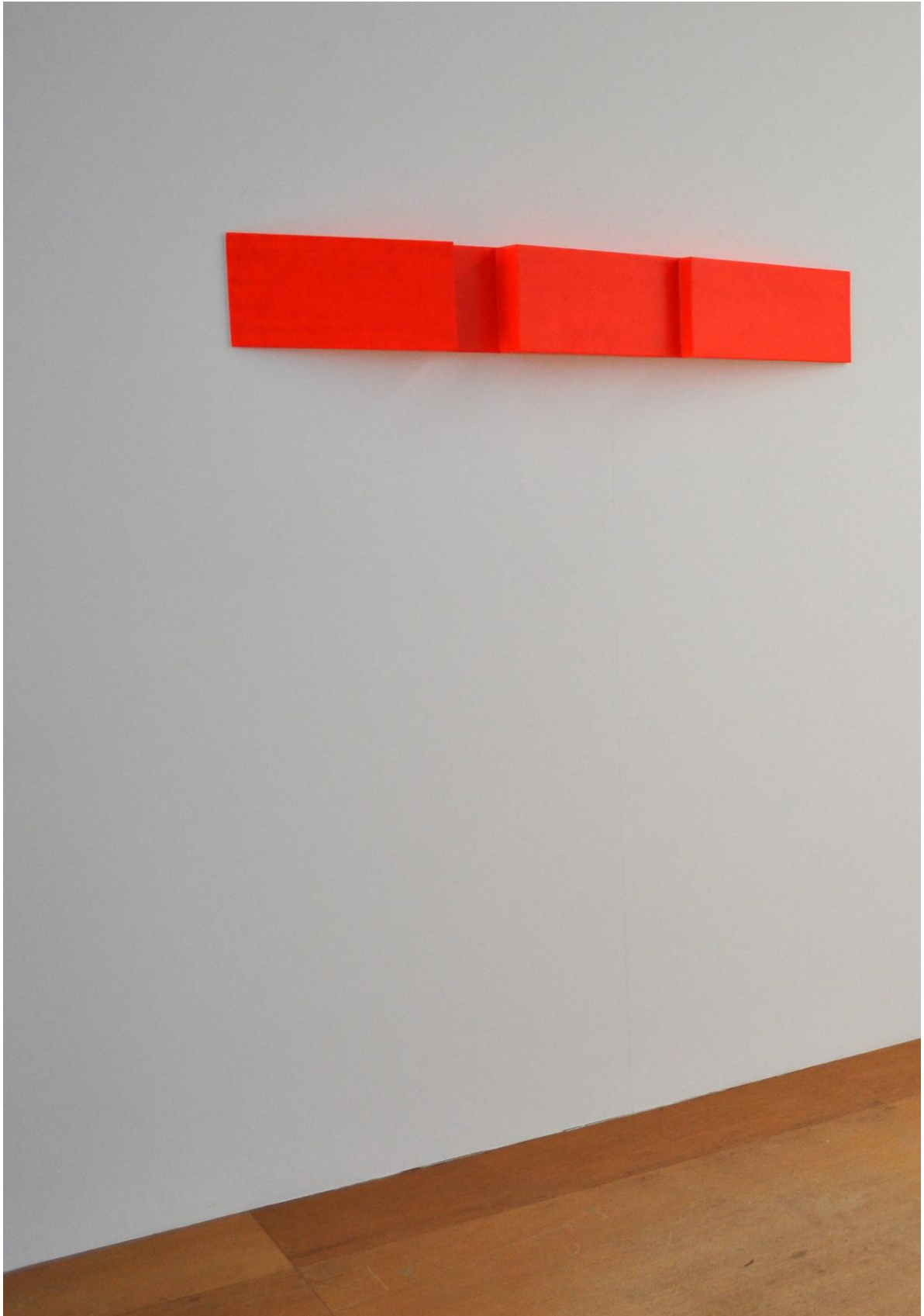




Jeremy Kirwan Ward, Closed Drawing 2011 Bakelite veneer, oil and acrylic 14 x 56.5 42.5 cm

There is nothing more situational and atmospheric than light. Jeremy Kirwan-Ward continued his interest in opticalthe world of ever-changing light with two built pieces – one from found objects and one constructed.<sup>3</sup> The latter activated architectural and landscape spaces in an overlay manner.<sup>4</sup> The former were two old varnished (Bakelite) drawers hanging as a diptych on the wall. The internal spaces, though concealed from a front on view by the facing, were painted orange. One could see this orange either as a faint radiating shadow on the gallery wall or by walking over to peer in the drawers. The bounced internal glow was very ephemeral, which would have been more resonant of deep or continued space if there was a brighter and more consistent light source, and I was left pondering why old drawers rather than constructed boxes? Metaphorically they helped me imagine lurking or haunting memories and evoked the passing of time, yet in the here and now space of the gallery the subtle shadow re-bound of the painted internal surfaces was more a dissolving dream like sensation than the mottled stains, cracks and substance of the outer surfaces suggested.

Opposite page Jeremy Kirwan Ward Open Drawing 2011 Lacquer and acrylic on hardboard 18.5 x 122 x 10.8 cm



What looked from the distance as something thematically too hot to almost “handle”, became up close another evocation of the transitional; empty drawers indeed. Perhaps a singular small object - such as a piece of hair, a rock, or cloth - placed in one of the drawers would have been an interface between the outer and inner spaces. As a door or window into exploration of believing what we see, the work required something more.



Installation view Angela Mc Harrie



The utilisation of a wider variety of media, to explore related ideas about structures and their role in coding sense perceptions, is taken up by Angela McHarrie who's bent for a Magritte like placement of objects and surreal distortion of scale fuses her work with that intrigue we have for the seemingly absurd.<sup>5</sup>

Angela McHarrie Dimensions Variable #1 2011 wood 38 x 36 x 10 cm



Angela McHarrie Pear on A Table 2011 30 x 30 cm

The ambiguity or uncertainty of measurement, particularly as related to the idea of dimension and planes (recalling the cubist interest in the fourth dimension), is evident in McHarrie's wooden ruler sculptures *Dimensions Variable*; one looped like an inverted apostrophe or perched like a tailed number six and the other formed by two rulers with one twisting upwards to form a triangle and the other slithering from a bracket like oblong up onto the base and through the triangle.

Depending on where one moved the geometry shifted and the rulers seemed to extend into ideas of limitlessness, however the former dropped into a gourd like capacity suggesting fruit or vine like metaphors, and the latter ideas of union. Additionally the interplay between triangle and oblong in the latter suggested a double axis.

Her two paintings – '*apple on a table*' and '*pear on a table*' – though constructed around ambiguity of scale (the distortion which occurs when we look through a window) featured objects which shifted the possible meanings of both series towards variations on the theme of masculine/feminine and arcadia/transformation. The organic joined or perched on the inanimate is curiously static and erotic yet ready for decay. Nonetheless there was enough improbability to the images and dimensions in all of her work for a range of meanings to suggest themselves.

Also meticulously crafted were the four works by Lesley Munro. Munro has periodically painted onto three dimensional objects to reflect a sense of journey but, when invited to participate in this show, she took the opportunity to develop an approach to both form and treatment of colour more minimal in aesthetic than her usual painting practice; though such an aesthetic has been somewhat evident in her photographs. The logic and discipline of simple planes of painted surfaces placed in proximity to each other, thus creating tonal modulations and melding of reflected colour, was beautifully utilized in the two plywood boxes which formed her *Light Industry*. Notwithstanding its initial unobtrusive presence, once seen it was difficult to dislodge from the eye.

(Below) Lesley Munro *Light Industry* 2011 63 x 62 x 46 cm Plywood



The clever placement of colour and plane created the subtle shifting of symmetry into asymmetry that one experiences when looking at a mirage; shifting between the abutted planes and through colour reflected both off the structure and the floor. Indeed if art requires an incident of dramatic tension or pictorial disruption then *Light Industry* indicated that this could have simplicity; though one based on precise logic and disciplined awareness. In this work tones of orange and pink modulated so that form detached from ground, thereby puncturing the structural design and viewer's space. Line became plane and flat ground became negative to the projecting figure positive. The work so eloquently spoke of the self-contained illusionistic rendering of shape and the nexus of depth and breadth that I understood the attraction of op minimalism for perhaps the first time.



In *Prefabrication*, Munro presented a table top cityscape of painted off cuts, and took the geometric divisions and counter actions of figure/ground division treated minimally in *Light Industry*, into a polyphonic conversation. Here the colours aided solidity and mass or lightness (hence air), and complicated the shapes by either foreshortening or advancing the tilt and line of individual shapes as well as the overall advancing and receding properties of area, solidness, void and perspective. Grouped the off cuts became imitative replicas of the buildings and structures which such materials build, reminding the viewer of the mimetic quality of every object.

Above LesleyMunro Prefabrication 2011 mixed dimensions wood paint.

Building structural forms rather than painting was also the challenge that Eveline Kotai took up. In her series of small works perforated sheets of canvas and other materials - inscribed with numbers, letters and geometric shapes – were laminated or sewn together into cylinders, spirals, long scrolls or other totem like shapes which were both contained yet flowing. Overlaid, rolled, cut into triangles or cones their muted pastel marks made them look weathered. They resembled cryptograms, archetypal alphabets, genetic codes or constellations. They suggested union, fusion, evolution, oscillation, merging and emerging; a tantric ellipse spiralling between yin and yang.



A micro-macro echo around the alchemical idea of mirroring (as above so below) or of some unperceived transmutation processes between the finite and infinite, had these small works attaining an ineffable quality beyond their scale. Their scale suited the intimacy of their marks. And scale was important to their success, as any larger and their quality of repetition would have become an obsessive patterning or decorative activity guided by play with material, rather than adaption of pattern and shape to signify archetypal nature.

Above Eveline Kotai Fan Fan 2011 Varied Dimensions Paint, Linen Thread



As the perforations of Kotai's work suggested doors and windows can also be regarded as glimpses into other worlds and thus as apertures. The window in particular has been regarded as symbolising a receptive vehicle for divine vibrations of light.<sup>6</sup> The eye is the locus for the stream of outer objective experience. Thus the body part, central to our interaction with art made to be seen, is the eye.

Above Eveline Kotai Spiral Painting i-iii 2011 60 x 15 diam. Oil mesh thread

Taking this as her theatre Carol Wells in her work for *the Window & the Door* used a sensibility based around ready-mades, collage and found objects to make recycled constructions under the idea of the exploded eye. Her titles – such as *Dilation*, *Light Catcher*, *Yellow Monocle*, *Pink & Blue Viewer*, *3<sup>rd</sup> Eye Viewer*, *Gallery Glasses* – give a literal indication of the subject. Her materials and technique (that of the everyday and craft) held an echo of childhood games and resonated with both high-art or low-art references.



Carol Wells installation view.

Below Carol Wells Light Catcher 2011 Acid free board, acrylic paint , masking tape 140 x 28,5 diam

It perhaps comes as no surprise that Wells has worked on film projects and as a set designer, or that her previous exhibitions have included (Richard Tuttle like) assemblages made from recycled materials hung so as to cast elegant shadows on the walls. Here the constructions, one of which reminded me of Joy Hester's protruding eye drawings, could be read as dissections or models of eyes, as glasses (from horn-rims and goggles to opera-glasses) and as various scopes (micro and kaleidoscope to telescope). Made from recycled cups and boxes they suggested the body as a consumer instrument and our senses as becoming intimately re-fabricated by technology. Pop, Op and theoretical questions regarding (amongst other things) perceptibility, discernibility, plainness, distinctiveness come to mind.





Following the exhibition's motivational text Wells' work cleverly formed a tautological feedback loop which reduced one to seeing 'seeing', *and the* seeing of seeing, as being singular as well as universal. As a group of works it had an immanence that communicated the game of emptiness (Cheshire Cat grin like) whereby objects manifest and transform because of our gaze. Her work was full of optic fun but not in the least monocular in its range of vision.

Above. Carol Wells Alice's Table 2011 Recycled Cardboard.

*What then* the success of this exhibition's intention to stretch the participating artists' (and supposedly the viewers understanding of) art practice?

I certainly came away from the exhibition wondering about the subjectivities of taste and the various theoretical frameworks both viewer or artist can apply to making and seeing. Indeed a consistent presentation or repetition of medium, motifs, skills or conceptual ideas allows those involved in the wider response to the art - reviewers, curators, galleries, collectors and institutions – to eventually believe that such an artist has a certain quality or integrity in their approach. Accordingly their style can then be promoted (as any 'look' can), while the discussion around what is now an oeuvre becomes seemingly more precise and objective in its descriptions because the promoters also take up the repetition. What most artists and their Gallery hope for is that a momentum builds around the inevitable 'accessibility' of the work whereby the style becomes entwined in its own proof; whereby reputation, meaning and style are tantamount to the same thing. Then again what of the artists' continuing individuality and creativity or their post-modern sense of plurality and ease of play?

Do such questions matter? I think they do. Being aware that the route towards ridding the world of ambiguities is the road to conservatism and predictability, where pluralism is shunned, experimentation ridiculed and trends manipulated, is important. Though it appears that people *around* art want some sort of cumulative narrative sense of what certain galleries and artists offer, do artists? If making is about skilling and experimenting how does one not get boxed into a stylistic corner?

For artists working outside their preferred ideas, format or medium the artists in ***the Window & the Door*** demonstrated a great expertise and sensitivity to the material. Given the challenge it should perhaps come as no surprise that inventiveness and engagement became the exemplar. Yet, because it is a surprise, it raises questions about why a particular style or approach begins to filter what they usually produce.

Having opened up new territory for themselves it will be interesting to see what sort of confidence this gives each of them to either use unfamiliar mediums, develop a narrower focus on a particular aspect or element of their work, or strive towards a more comprehensive goal. Thus I left the exhibition thinking: "Open it up, be bolder, get offensive, ramp up the scale and embrace the freedom."

I wonder how many of those participating stepped back to notice how, away from the promises or convictions of the maker, art becomes autonomous and suggests its own course. Such play is the stuff of art and what produces the ambiguity of the aesthetic.

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<sup>1</sup> Perth Galleries – the Window & the Door (February 11<sup>th</sup> to March 6<sup>th</sup>) 2011.

<sup>2</sup> Statement made to the author at Perth Galleries by Wells and Coss, North Fremantle, Feb 27<sup>th</sup> 2011. The text given for inspiration to each artist was reproduced on the back of the catalogue. It read in part (paraphrasing removed here): “*Where a window ‘frames’ and a mirror reflects’, a door asks us to move through. And while painting is often seen as a ‘view’ that remains on a wall, sculpture evokes other people in that room: other people, not just objects or scenery, because sculpture speaks to our bodily need to interact. When Alice stepped through the looking glass I ceased being a view and became a door. .... And of gravity? The more obvious realm of sculpture? Gravity does not demand an ‘optimal’ view. Whether hung from the ceiling or sprouting from the ground, sculpture gives permission to dance while we observe, with the artist’s dance leading. For even our experience of light is known only within the parameters of gravity.*”

<sup>3</sup> Kirwan-Ward received a prestigious Creative Development Fund Fellowship from the W.A. Department of the Arts in 1987 and started exhibiting with Perth Galleries in their inaugural year.

<sup>4</sup> Here he presented a solid and layered geometric construction which, painted bright orange, occupied both real and illusory space.

<sup>5</sup> (Like Alice in Wonderland who observes) “... *while playing croquet in the garden observes that she is unable to figure out if there are any rules to the game and if there is, if anyone is abiding by them. This sentiment for me is pertinent when thinking about McHarrie’s work.*” – see Peake, Clare. Artist In Profile: Angela McHarrie , published in *tete-a-tete*, issue five 2010.

<sup>6</sup> Gaskell, G.A. Dictionary of All Scriptures and Myths, Avenel Books New York, 1981 edition. ‘Window’ p. 817.