

Positive and creative review of my 2011 exhibition *A Basic Guide to Crystal & Colour Magic* by critic Ken Bolton for his regular review series 'Cuts of Their Jibs', featured on the Australian Experimental Arts Foundation website.

## **The Cuts Of Their Jibs—August through October, 2011—Art of the Stat Dec, and other cunning ploys**

**Artists: Celest Aldahn, Matthew Bradley, Akira Akira, Masato Takasaka, Koji Ryui**

**by Ken Bolton**

### **Assertion of Values? An Assertion Of Style?**

Celeste Aldahn exhibited *New Works—A Basic Guide To Crystal & Colour Healing* (July 22—August 28) in the CACSA project space—and stylistically and thematically kindred work also in the Jam factory's *Good Job Team* exhibition. The Jam Factory works—two pieces—both dealt with teen-girl culture. I thought them a notch or two or four above the rest of that exhibition. The CACSA show also focuses on teen-girl culture, but allied to an interest in astrology, crystallography, magic—all to evoke, or invoke, teenage witchcraft within girl culture, specifically, I gather, of the 1990s.

I guess the work at CACSA uses the style (and the 'tropes') of these para-realist concepts to lay out before the viewer some images of teen girlhood and to give, via astrological and other schema, accounts of its progressions, phases, types and attitudes etc. And also to give a sense of this as practice—and as bravado or wish-fulfilment. Perhaps not wish fulfilment, but the enjoyment of acting out that state of power and secretiveness. These things must establish one's difference and individuality and also make a claim to generational difference.

The CACSA project space is treated as one unified space and within it Aldahn creates a reassuringly controlled circuit for the visitor. At its farthest reach is an open teepee and a loose arrangement of small daises and of hung items (dream-catchers, glassy crystals finely suspended, and so on) which curve outward and then in upon the centre-piece tent. (Think of the approach to St Peters, but very small: the arranged items, or stages toward (or back from) the teepee, are like Bernini's colonnade. The teepee is the main building.)

Given the operative aesthetic that accompanies this magicky and spiritual world, Aldahn necessarily works with a great deal of pink and pale blue and turquoise, and white. And a lot of beads, a lot of tinyness; a lot of mock-primordial/mock-timeless arrangements. Shrine-like circles arc around centrepieces, there are pyramidal or altar-like arrangements. Such arrangements are shared by many dressing tables and vanities etc. So the manner is familiar enough and legible.

It is a difficult style to work with successfully in making art. It courts cliché for one thing. (Usually it is somehow *about* cliché or signalling, foregrounding, the kitsch.) The palette is a little tired and shrilly sweet. But Aldahn circumvents or sails over these difficulties. The environment that the artist presents as an installation hangs together coherently, has a simple visual order as a whole and leads one unhurriedly, by stages, past the whole. Each stage is a kind of deposit of visual interest and is curious enough to hold the attention.

Aldahn works with what is a sub-cultural style. Which puts criticism (and the viewer) in a funny position: the viewing endeavour is challenged before it begins, partly because the function of a sub-cultural style is to challenge the viewer, to exclude the outsider and to frame the outsider *as* such.

A badge of identity, and exclusionary, the mode is not simple communication, not conventional decoration. It is not offered straight—as art is thought by aestheticians to be. That is, it's not simply there for appraisal.

Punk—to consider another sub-cultural style—might be thought aggressive in its assertion of itself as —what?— *all there is that's real?* There's no point disagreeing or asking for a broader perspective. It is going to do what it does—and that is why we like it. Its wrong-headedness is what we want from it.

Similarly with Girl-power, with magical, Druidy, emo vocabularies. (Not that I am of a generation to even name them with confidence.) Subcultural styles reject the ordinary viewer (for being ordinary) together with the viewer's ability to judge—or they say that they don't care about those judgements.

The styles on tap here make available a range of addresses to the viewer: affecting a deliberately infantile, pouting sulk, or an idealistic (maybe slightly flakey) spirituality.

But all styles seek to cut *some sort* of dash, have *some* assertion of their aesthetic—as having *éclat*, integrity, hold, efficacy (?). In that sense, they presuppose an audience. Maybe an audience that is like-minded, maybe one less predetermined.

Anyway, that said, Aldahn's installation looks okay, where it might have seemed simply bitty and amateur. Individual parts of the exhibition are very well done. There are some nice designs (portraits, stylized in the manner of Japanese t-shirt graphics) made on small rounds of wood on one wall. These were beautiful and interestingly made, witty. The arrangements, on very small artist-made tables, were inventively cute and interesting.

Showing at the same time as Louise Haselton's *errand workshop* exhibition in the main CACSA gallery, certain comparisons were inevitable. Aldahn's work made Haselton's seem, by comparison, remarkably pure. Haselton's works tend to combine a pair of elements and to do so on the basis of single qualities: curious shape, surface, or texture; contrasts of heavyness and lightness and so on, of organic and inorganic, lofty and low. They don't come with cultural ballast attached to them. Where Haselton seeks to escape the buzz of cultural association Aldahn is of course operating with material that is offered, second-degree, as an existing lingua franca, or a sub-cultural style. It is full of buzz—of meanings and of the assumptions behind them. Even so, Aldahn's show seemed coherent: a generic narrative of attitudes and life-stages, as astrology and teen-discourse deal with those things, by turns sassy, temperamental, other-worldly.

A kind of episteme, right?. Maybe Aldahn's art endorsed it, maybe it didn't. Maybe it offered them as a tentative, or speculative envisioning?

It was not clear how much Aldahn was proposing about the mode she was using. Was she using it, or exhibiting it with some degree of distance? Perhaps I have to assume the latter: for me these things are on a par with UFOs, numerology and phrenology, religion. But that's me—it might not be you. Aldahn's taste and graphic skills are very sure and the intelligence behind the art is clear and witty. A sign of things to come.

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## **A Big World**

Much of Matthew Bradley's work (showing at Greenaway, August 24—September 18, under the title *New vehicles and exploration*) has consisted of attitudes, of enthusiasms, exhibited. Like Aldahn's proffered world, Bradley's presentations constitute something of a statement of values, and with a similar take-it-or-leave-it aspect. Some of it has been the identifying badge of a particular stream of male youth culture. But much of it has been offered as intrinsically interesting: not as cult phenomenon but as, in principle, great, exciting, symbolic of 'good things'. It is not offered as irony. (Not like Peter Blake's self portrait as an Elvis fan, for example—where the belief, and the gormless artist-figure, stand bathetically beside the god-like Elvis, whose image is pinned over every inch of Blake's clothing). Nor as foolishly trusting (as, say, with Leunig's 'Face the future with a child on a stick' picture).

Bradley often presents an enthusiasm: or a hero; a tale of derring-do—for our admiration. Specifics, rather than a sampled or synechdotal category.

The latest Bradley exhibition at Greenaway showed some portraits of Abel Tasman, some maps of the period, some samples of the illustration style and cartographic decorative embellishments of the time. The show's centre-piece was a scale model of a seventeenth century ship. This last, its making and showing, would seem to be an act of devotion, a guarantee of the artist's high estimation of Tasman and of like explorers. A *kind* of extremism—the detail, the time taken—but less 'out there' than some of his gestures have been.

The exhibition takes its place with Bradley's others, a sequence of like declarations of enthusiasm or belief, depositions of ephemera attesting to the truth of the undertakings, implying a fan's interest in any mementos—votive objects holy Through their association with the original undertaking: maps in this case, illustration of mid century rocket science in an earlier show.

Other exhibitions have dealt in Victorian heavy industrial icons (quasi ruins a la Piranesi, but real: physical and big), in Bradley's boys-on-weird-bicycles; and the dangerous tower climbing and flights around Adelaide, the 'clockwork orange' boys on motor bikes.

Often the focus is on moments of intensity—the other side of the coin—(or is it almost the same side of the daring/heroic theme: danger, derring-do and consequent intensity of experience and attention, and consequent beauty?). We behold the beautiful city, the flaming tyre, the speeding motorcycle. And we are lifted out of the ordinary.

As a series Matthew Bradley exhibitions have begun to build to an identifiable and impressive body of work. Individually, show by show, the work can sometimes seem to beg the response, So what? They can read as a little verbless, or as not proposing very much, or not proposing anything compelling. A problem for the artist. Bradley can not afford to simply become a fan. The exhibition strategy presupposes an audience with memory enough to add each new showing to the work thus far, which is a bit of a gamble. Bradley seems one of the bright lights of his generation here in Adelaide, so one hopes the audience stays with him and builds.

The modelled boat was inherently interesting perhaps, but not as art. As art what might be interesting was the gesture of placing it there, of using it. But in *New vehicles and exploration* was the model pulling its weight here? The supporting material (the maps, parchment decorations etcetera) could not assist much.

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**Art To Look At**

Three artists—Akira Akira, Masata Takasaka, and Koji Ryui—showed at CACSA over September: *Post Logical Form* (September 7—October 14, 2011).

I suppose *Post Logical Form* proposed a display of their ‘brand’ or ‘signature’ sensibility? The catalogue essay was a meditation on identity, national identity and the suturing of the individual within an endorsed, a controlling norm—and on the need to counter this, the individual’s feeling of it as inadequate, as ill-fitting, as delimiting. The writer is a Japanese curator of mixed European and Japanese parentage—and, therefore, mixed ‘background’. Which is his story and may also speak for the artists, all three of whom work in Australia.

The front gallery was Koji Ryui’s: these were arrangements of wire sculpture (coathangers, wood, other wire, some aluminium poles), busily full of wit and virtuosic play, play with confusion and legibility, with profusion and simplicity. And invention. White wire curled and cavorted in the slight gloom of the gallery and against its dark floor. It seemed full of movement. And our movement about it accentuated this effect—which was a little like finding the aerosol ‘party spray’ people used to produce (at parties) suddenly embiggened and strong enough to stand. As I recall them, these generally stood knee to hip high. The wire (which in parts was thin enough to read as knitting wool, depending on its colour and how much it was bending or twisting) was intriguingly hard to get a fix on.

The backroom was taken over by Masato Takasaka: a maximalist, happily messy exposition—of what might have been items of ‘Japanese’ taste and severity, but were much less restrictive than that. Mostly amusing items, not for the most part precisely ‘consumerist’ items either. The title of the main piece is would-be disarming—a maximalist apologia cum manifesto, and a joke of course: ‘Another Propositional Model For The Everything Always Alreadymade Wannabe Studio Masatotectures Museum Of Found Refractions 1994—2011’. A subtitle follows. But I’ll spare you. The work was not unamusing.

Akira Akira, in the CACSA middle room, was by comparison a cool formalist: I thought all of Caro/Dutch/Scandinavian, Frank Lloyd Wright/Japanese architecture, Mies v d Rohe modernism, Carl Andre, Judd: simple planes and textures, subtly tense or telling placement and variation. Akira works Cool rather than Hot: less-is-more is the working method—so that, rather than overload and redundancy of information, every detail counts and attracts one’s attention, gains one’s scrutiny, even the relatively blank surfaces. And under this scrutiny the surfaces—veneers, pine, particle board—aren’t blank or uniform, edges are not too refined in their finish. These were mostly floor-pieces: and like flat-pack items awaiting assemblage they could seem poetically charged with potential and the space seem a little tense with it. The work has the amusing ‘Ripping Yarns’ title, ‘Whatever Could Have Happened For Things To Have Come To This?’ I liked Akira Akira’s work and Ryui’s. Takasaka’s seemed an old ploy, that seeks to

deflect criticism with its good-naturedness. But the Takasaka work does not cohere, in my view, and its will to trump our senses with number and variety probably required more dynamics of physical scale and of kind. But then you might decide to change your focus: it might be viewed, ideally, as the scale model for a riotously exuberant shopping complex.

All these exhibitions might be brought under the heading of foregrounded or 'brandished' sensibility. That is how I have treated them here. But, one might ask, Is this not similarly true of John Barbour and Louise Haselton, for example? Or of almost all art? But here I am suggesting that it is a recognised *kind* or *genre* that is offered. Or that its recognisability *as* youth culture, or as 'contemporary', or 'Japanese', is part of the equation. Another part of this equation would of course be the artist's individual instancing of it. (Not just 'punk', but terrific, casual, humorous etc.)

It's a distinction. At the same time the artists might stand in different relations *to* that demonstrated style or manner: Aldahn is almost certainly at some distance from hers, offering it with ambivalence or perhaps irony.

The CACSA trio are probably un-ambivalent: Takasaka is celebratory and amused as well as attempting to amuse; Ryui would seem fully involved in his virtuoso performance with the medium and space and line; Akira's commitment might be to involvement with the medium and the procedural decisions he has made—the task brought off satisfactorily. Not, in his case, a great deal to be ironic about: it's 'international', it is 'modern', it is revisited and revived (it is post-modern), it attempts to be 'now' and it suggests the moment, the tense concentration, of its making, the procedures that have given rise to the work's particular form. Only Takasaka's work references the social world, perhaps a 'specular' world—through the employment of collected objects, logos etcetera.

Ambivalence and irony are a kind of leverage and Celeste Aldahn's work seems to remark upon the politics of the style. The Post-Logicals aim at exemplification of a manner, an aesthetic, a sensibility. Where the trio's contemporaneity is offered as a factor the work's task is to make us more alert *to* that novelty, its freshness, its particular openness to (or appropriateness to) specific kinds of phenomena. If it makes us more alive and more alive *to* the world around us well and good. (Does this sound Pollyana?) Criticality, though, is not within their grasp in this situation. And I suppose that I have come to the conclusion that degrees of Japaneseness were not the point: each artist was relaxed, I think, about letting the cards fall where they may in that respect.