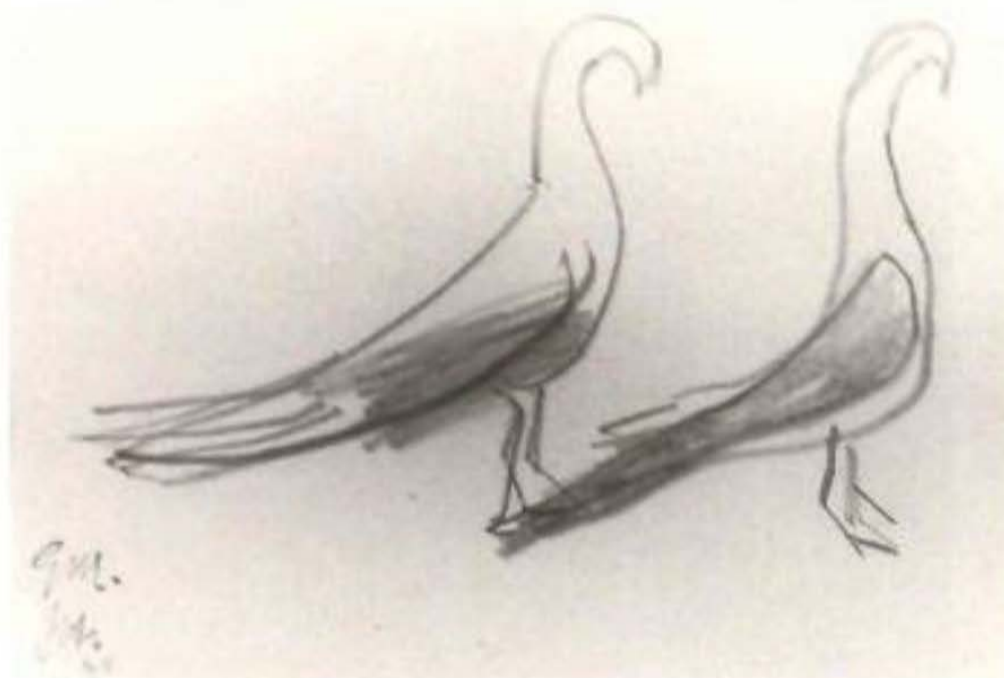


ARTIST'S CHOICE NO. 32

# Godfrey Miller:

## *Still life with musical instruments*

Mary Macqueen



GODFREY MILLER · BIRDS · 1961-63 · Pencil · 10 x 15 cm · Private Collection

I FIRST BECAME AWARE of Godfrey Miller as an artist in 1959 through a retrospective exhibition of his work at the old National Gallery of Victoria in Swanston Street, Melbourne.

From the beginning I was strongly attracted to his work and returned a number of times, sometimes with students as I was then teaching part-time at R.M.I.T.

Initially it was the drawings that interested me and it was from these that I gained the most and which gave me the best insight into his interesting and searching mind.

He appears throughout his life to have done much drawing both from the human figure and from animals and birds, ever simplifying and gaining knowledge of basic principles, thrusts and tensions.

I am fortunate in having two life drawings

and one of a mountain with light washes. His mountain is reminiscent of Paul Cézanne's *Mont St Victoire*. It also links with one of my own basic shapes, that of a convex mountain or the inverse crater, Mt Poorat in Victoria and its crater being the origin for me of that particular shape.

I am sure his constant enquiries into the human figure have been a great influence on my own subsequent work.

Before beginning a painting the idea seems to have been thought through in thumb-nail sketches, various ideas of weights, positions, tensions *et cetera*.

Perhaps the grid suggests itself. The very fine ruled lines resulting form facets — the basis for tonal values.

*Still life with musical instrument* consists mainly of a white jug, three oranges, a lute and

a table top — not a complicated arrangement.

The jug being white has the highest light — the modelling broken facets of darker tones, rich and varied. The placing of several tiny patches of contrast in lighter and warmer colours give lift.

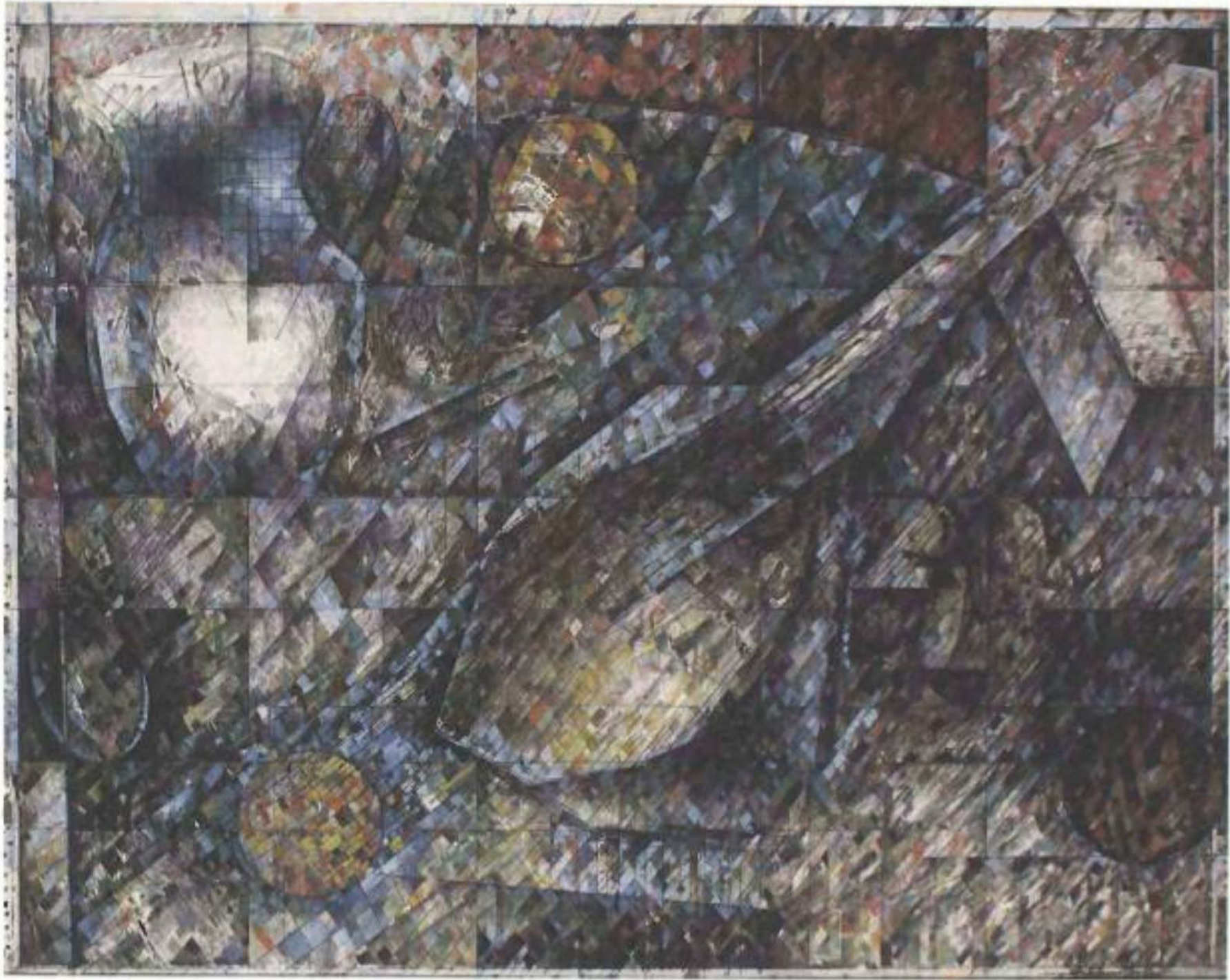
The oranges are varied, as is the lute. Again the small areas of contrast are very important.

It is this wonderful handling of colour that to me is so fascinating and so much an equivalent to music.

For me a good Godfrey Miller painting relates closely to music. Full orchestra — the occasional solo instrument emerging.

Possibly this was the unknown force that held me in the beginning. That and the searching mind shown in his drawings.

Mary Macqueen is an artist who lives and works in Melbourne.



GODFREY MILLER STILL LIFE WITH MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS 1963 Oil on canvas on board 65.1 x 62.3 cm National Gallery Victoria, Melbourne Felton Bequest 1963

# Eighties appropriation — Fetish or Feast?

*The Art of Geoff Lowe, Stieg Persson and David Waderton*

Ted Gott



GEOFF LOWE UNTITLED (TOWER HILL DRAWING II) 1985 Sanguine conté on paper 57.2 x 75.8 cm  
National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne

**A**PPROPRIATION, quotation, art-historical cross-referencing — these, it seems, are the new catchcries of mainstream art in the eighties. But is all this art-historical quotation, in fact, merely an elegantly historicizing veil to justify the new figuration's usurpation of power from abstraction? Is appropriation a thin cover for lack of real content in contemporary art? In New York, Sherrie Levine's anarchically appropriating canvases certainly project the epitome of the gelded image and passé prostituted palette of a post-postmodernist malaise. Yet one can argue that, down under at least, artistic borrowing or quotation is not a banal gesture springing from a com-

mon fount of incestuous intent, but a specific artistic process gaining new relevance from each particular instance of its usage. This article examines the specific meaning of appropriation for three artists, in the belief that the diverse intentions behind their use of quotation can act as a timely warning against any broad derogatory categorization of this current Australian trend as an empty bandwagon, a failed eighties fetish. Appropriation is, indeed, a highly misleading term when used across the board to imply any unified movement or common causality for the art it seeks to define.

In Geoff Lowe's art appropriation is deliberate and polemical, not so much ironical as cal-

culated to stimulate the viewer's plays of association. Far from innocent, the quoted reference ultimately acts to guide one's response in a particular direction. Such concerns crystallize in Lowe's 1985–86 group of Tower Hill drawings. Tower Hill, a noted Victorian landmark, was painted in its original vegetal purity by Eugene von Guérard in 1855; after that it was systematically destroyed and denuded. When the Victorian Government set about replanting the area as a reserve in the 1960s, the only surviving depiction of it in its natural state was von Guérard's; and so it was decided to replant according to von Guérard, life quoting art. Lowe, struck by this three-dimen-



GEOFF LOWE VIOLENCE 3 1984 Charcoal and polymer gloss on paper 74 x 54 cm  
Collection of the artist. Courtesy Powell Street Gallery, Melbourne



GEOFF LOWE VIOLENCE 4 (TEN FAMOUS FEELINGS FOR MEN) 1984 Charcoal and conté on paper 74 x 54 cm. Collection of the artist. Courtesy Powell Street Gallery, Melbourne

sional use of quotation to create a meaningful surround within which to exist, commenced a cyclical drawn investigation into the Tower Hill mythology and reforestation methodology. The drawings, mapped out as a set of visual and mnemonic quotations, mingle direct observation, contemporary ecological commentary and fragmented quotation from past art works in a series of interlocking linear units. From one to another they shift forward and backward through differing degrees of alternating emphasis. A persistent substratum of artistic illusion underwrites the landscape vistas, referring back to von Guérard and assorted nineteenth-century picturings of the Tower Hill site. But in deference to Lowe's affection for Italian clarity and precision of design (nurtured by travel in Italy in 1980 and 1985), remembrances of the sun-baked Tuscan countryside and direct use of Piero della

Francesca's balmy aerial perspective round out this homage to past and present landscape modes.

In *Tower Hill drawing I* Geoff Lowe employs deceptively simple means to map-out a rich and complex image. Conté is used on the flat side and brushed over the paper to catch the patterning of its surface; denser chalk working delineates further shadowy details. The effect gained at close range is one of a landscape vista seen through layers of mist, a hazy Corot-esque mood. Further away, the drawing tightens into a crisp atmospheric study; storm clouds and rain squalls emerge, and light lingers starkly on the watery foreground. In its basic structure the drawing derives from von Guérard's *Tower Hill* oil (Collection Fisheries & Wildlife Service, on loan to Warrnambool Art Gallery) with its blend of topographical distancing, atmospheric observation and Claude-

like *coulisse* framing devices. Pressed up close against its surface, however, shadowy figures move, recalling the native staffage of early colonial prints. That these figures ultimately derive from Lowe's earlier Italianate *Ten Famous Feelings for Men* cycle enhances appreciation of the artist's layered process of composition, but is not integral to enjoyment of the work.

*Tower Hill drawing II* engages more fully in visual diatribe. Its meticulous and retentive delineation of landscape details encourages belief in a careful depiction of reality, yet instead draws heavily on fifteenth-century notions of topography and perspectival precision. The rolling landscape vistas from Piero della Francesca's portrait panels of Federigo da Montefeltro and his wife in the Uffizi are evoked here in particular. Lowe's quotation, far from being an affected conceit, points to a

serious disjunction between the current condition of the Victorian countryside, romantic attempts to recreate its original state, and the 'ideal' landscapes familiar from art-historical imagery.

The *Ten Famous Feelings for Men* series of drawings from 1983–85 again glances back to an Italianate precursor, this time Andrea del Castagno's *Uomini famosi* frescoes for the Legnaia villa near Florence. The *Feelings* were created as a group of four boxed sets containing ten drawings apiece; four versions each of ten subjects were drawn and each box thus houses dramatically different workings of the same narrative cycle, a serial blend of uniqueness and continuity. But whereas Castagno's monumental frescoes of circa 1451 displayed civic pride in celebrated male figures such as Petrarch, Dante and Boccaccio, and presented masculinity in dominant control, Lowe's drawings show the face of modern masculinity under attack. His decade of loorning, unsettling post-macho entities examines positions of and alternatives to the concepts of 'manliness' challenged so dramatically by the reformist power of feminism — a visual exploration of survival and regrouping in sexual adversity. The drawings function not as an anti-feminist harangue, but as an attempt to probe the continuing validity, or lack thereof, of the tattered remnants of public 'maleness' that have escaped social and political feminist reforms. They operate in the void that confronts today's male, for feminism, in positively destabilizing deep-rooted and constrictive requisites of manliness, yet failed to provide an alternative set of values with which Adam's brood could replace tired machismo posturings.

In the *Ten Famous Feelings* suite strange male apparitions stand before, or within, severe framing doorways (echoes of Andrea del Castagno), elusive archetypes entrapped by their stereotypical geometric surrounds. The sexual confrontation and aggressive outcome of heroic nudes lifted from Antonio Pollaiuolo's fifteenth-century engraving *Battle of the nude men* (Violence), cultural commentary on the historical paradigm of the Oz battler (Buckley) or hirsute reverberation of rampant fantasy (Wildman) — these forceful dissections of the post-feminist masculine psyche unite with sequential precision into a patterned, ritualized and totemic panorama of self-questioning personas.

The four boxes of the *Ten Famous Feelings*

for Men cycle pit the demands of representation in constant competition with the overbearing abstract concerns of a volatile and gestural drawing process. Schematic and clearly readable narratives alternate with more obscure sheets in which figures emerge dimly through almost fetishistically rich and dense layers of black lines, strokes and sweeps. Figural visions parade their way from box to box with chameleon-like appropriation of variant drawing modes. In essence the drawings find their origins in rigorous life drawing from a staged Italianate narrative vignette (documented photographically in each box). But in the plastic working through of Lowe's ideas, the drawings move freely in a downstream linear intensification away from the original motif. Lowe wields pastel, charcoal, conté, oil-stick and acrylic with ease, and manipulates black, red, white and green colour values across the paper with an exploratory, expressive handling. In his capturing of visionary characters in a frenetic web of wild line, drawing as process becomes as much the subject of these works as the consequently subsumed narrative. Hence the 'narrative' or emblematic mood of each composition does not flag by its repetition through four progressively divergent drawings. The process of serializing focuses attention on the dynamics of drawing as graphic visual cogitation. Concurrently, in the *Ten Famous Feelings for Men* cycle moods of dignity, uncertainty and trauma are played out against a backdrop of attempted reconstruction of the male sensibility through non-ironical artistic quotation.

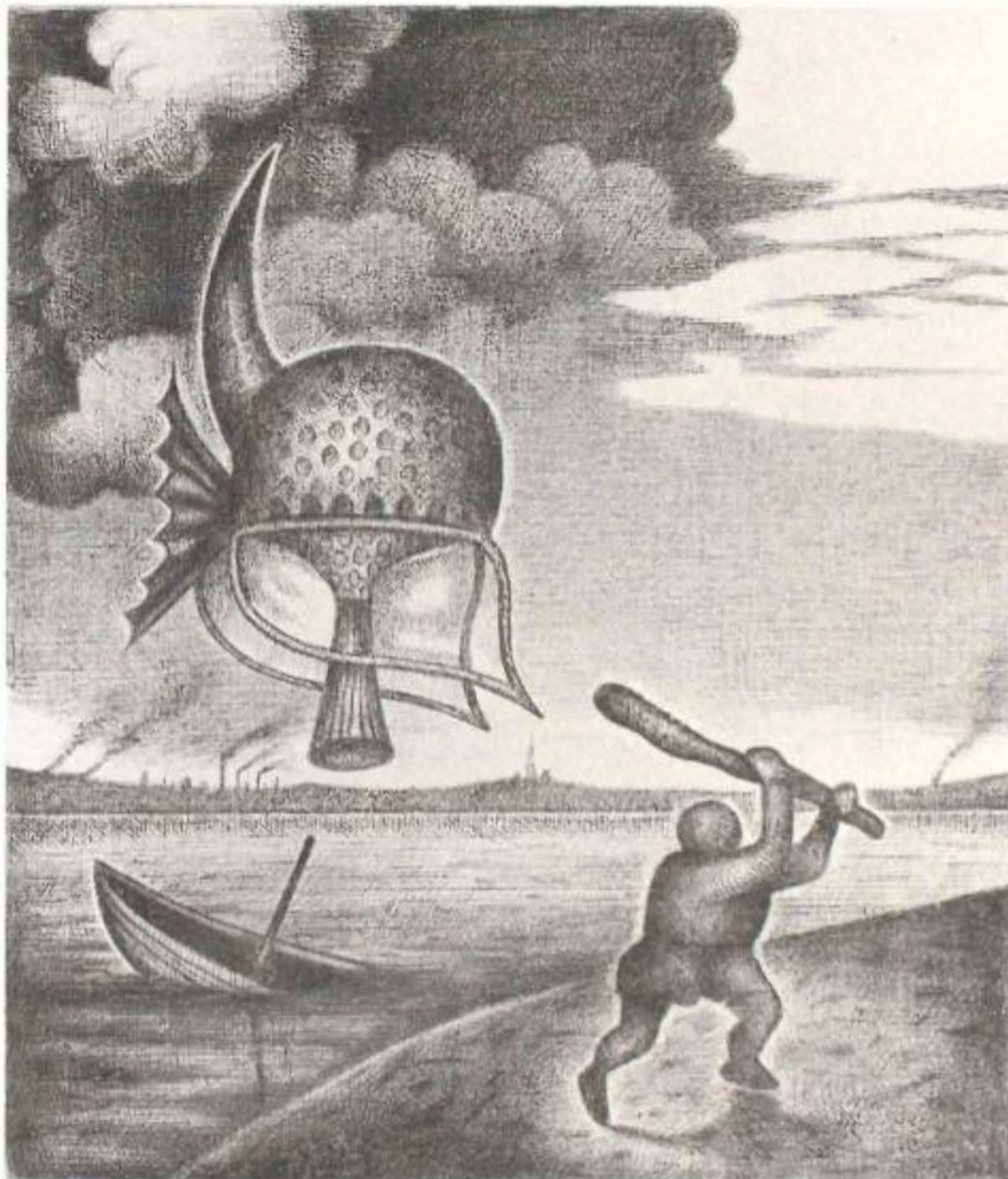
In Geoff Lowe's drawings the process of quotation functions not as an activity of wanton misappropriation, but as a plea for relocation, for a positive assertion of continuity, of the value of tradition. Italianate reference acts here not to titillate the art-historical palate, but rather to point out sexual and political — and artistic — concerns which confront the modern viewer.

With David Wadilton one finds instead an appropriation in awe, quotation without cynicism or overt polemical intent. An artist who has always turned to figurative expression and consistently eschewed abstraction — believing that great figurative art poses all the abstract and formal questions anyone could demand — Wadilton uses formal devices derived from the old masters to explore problems relevant to himself alone. What may appear at jaded first

sight as an ironic sleight against the masters is in fact honest seeking, a solid learning process. Like Philip Guston, adrift in a sea of doubt, Wadilton's art is about problem-solving and opposed to theorizing. His work indicates the extent to which the resurgence of figuration makes a genuine return to copying and sincere art-historical consideration possible. In the changed eclectic climate of eighties pluralism, there is no longer shame in looking back at the facture of the old masters.

A graduate of Preston Institute (1976), Wadilton developed early on a preference for realist painting. In 1982 postgraduate studies at Phillip Institute would lead to dissatisfaction with mimetic 'bondage' and provoke, in the following year, a severance from painting for six months. Wadilton in these months turned back to drawing from nature in order to liberate himself from the tyranny of the photograph. Gradually he learned to rediscover his own hand, eye and mind; the example of one of his lecturers, Dale Hickey, however, acted as a salient model for new essays at clear, simple compositions freed from the restrictive scale of his previous small photorealist works. Despite the lessons learned from Hickey, Wadilton would emerge as a largely self-taught painter, developing technically through trial and error consequent on pitting himself against the challenge of confrontation with the power of past masterworks.

In a series of highly coloured works unveiled in an inaugural solo show at Pinacotheca in 1984, Wadilton sought to co-opt Italianate imagery as a means of returning to formal composition. Traced fragments from reproductions of fourteenth- and fifteenth-century panels and frescoes were blown up and reorganized, collage-like, within fields of artificial colour hemmed in by defining, confining black lines. The appropriation of Francesco Traini's frescoed *Triumph of death*, circa 1350, from Pisa's Campo Santo in Wadilton's *Landscape with everyday objects* is undercut by a colouration drawn from Pablo Picasso's late Cubist still-life studies with their bright and illusionistic spatial games. Yet even this chromatic borrowing is belied by the rich, plastically obtrusive handling of paint in the canvases of this period. Piling one 'quotation' on another with a juggler's dexterity, the artist alternates between magician and *homo ludens*. The effect, however, is definitely *not* one of pastiche. At the root of his compositional play lies a firm belief in remain-



DAVID WADELTON SILVERPOINT  
DRAWING 1986 Silverpoint on  
gouache-grounded museum board  
19.4 x 16.6 cm Collection of the artist,  
courtesy Pinacotheca

ing open to all artistic influences, in the hope that they will eventually negate each other. Art-historical imagery is here part of Wadellton's own creative exploration, and it is the personal rationale behind these discordant, disjointed and therefore distinctly resonant referential fragments that overlays his oeuvre with a new and rich significance.

In May 1986, reading Mayer on the techniques of the old masters prompted David Wadellton to experiment with silverpoint drawings. His wife Lois, a jewellery artist, provided the raw materials and gouache on paper an initial ground. The clear 'reflective' surface of silverpoint gave a soothing antidote to the deep velvety chiaroscuro of a Georges Seurat-

evoking series of drawings completed in 1985-86. At the same time there was the thrill of employing a dead medium, an artistic ouija-board entrance into dialogue with lost masters. For Wadellton, however, this conscious archaism also fulfilled a personally expansive purpose. The precision and delicacy of handling demanded by the silverpoint medium acted as



DAVID WADELTON AT THE END OF THE JETTY 1986 Oil on canvas 182 x 182 cm Collection of the artist, courtesy Piracotheca



FRANCESCO TRAINI THE TRIUMPH OF DEATH (DETAIL) c. 1325-50 Camposanto, Pisa



DAVID WADERTON  
Study for LANDSCAPE WITH EVERYDAY  
OBJECTS  
1983 Gouache on paper  
Private collection

a good counter to the ever-present threat of a slide into the all-too-easy angst of modern Expressionism. Unlike the rigidity of pencil or ink drawing, the mellowing tarnish of silverpoint also imparted an otherworldly quality perfectly in keeping with Waderton's idiosyncratic appropriational usages. Small wonder that quotations from Pieter Bruegel's engravings gradually crept into the silverpoints.

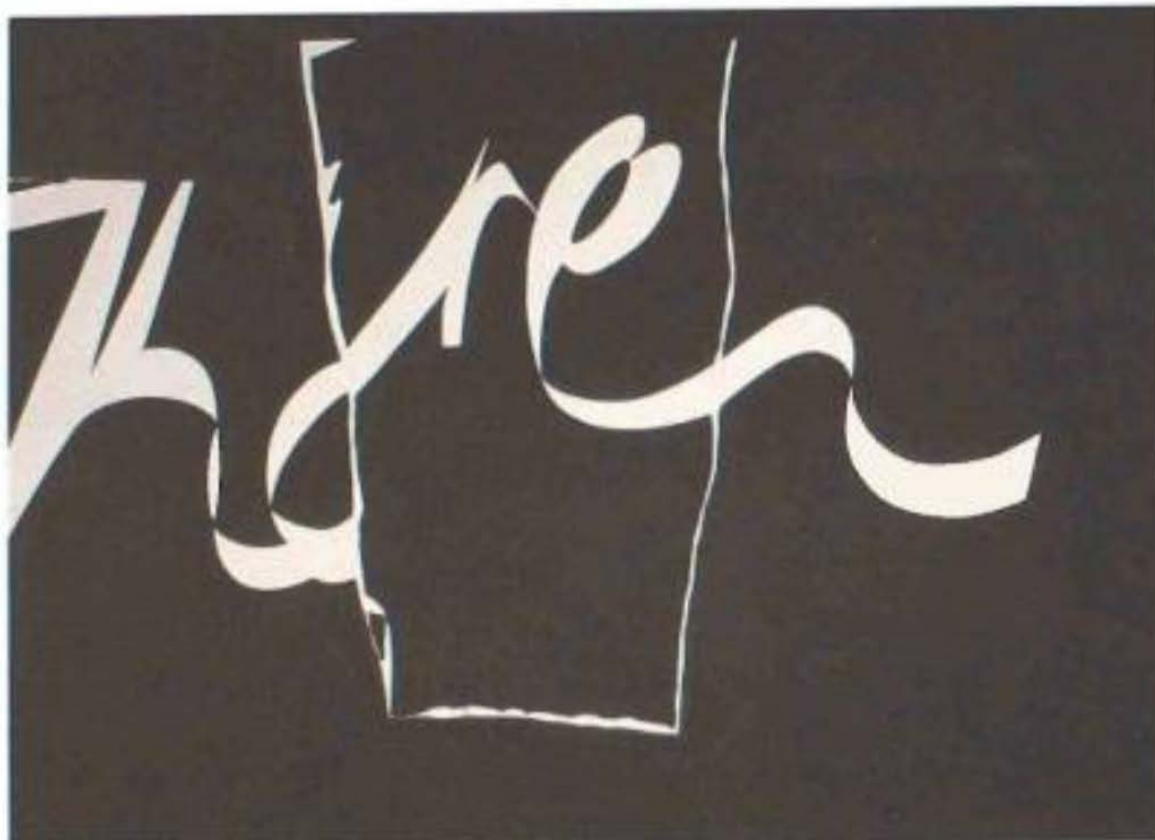
Even as Waderton experimented with new kinds of gouache grounds and switched to pure rag mount-board as a more agreeable support, so too did the technical wielding of the silverpoint needle more and more recall the precise burin strokes of the sixteenth-century engraving style. On a symbolic level,

the neurotic quality, the air of latent anxiety of despair so prevalent in Bruegel now seemed far more appropriate to the twentieth-century sensibility than the glorious praise of man that echoes through so much Italian painting. Twin-edged appropriation thus benefited Waderton both technically and thematically.

One is made constantly aware, though, that Waderton is not so much seeking a particularly significant imagery, as looking for a fine pictorial balance. Attending Peter Booth's Pinacotheca drawing show in 1983, he was confronted with a full return to modelling and nuances of shading which impressed him as allowing for a higher plateau of achievement than possible with his own earlier commitment

to linearity and the *cloisonniste* back line. But Booth was to be a galvanizing influence only. Waderton's recent large canvases, sharing the plastic voluptuousness of his charcoal and silverpoint drawings, ultimately respond more to the artist's grappling with the skilled mastery of Giorgio de Chirico. Study of de Chirico brought him to the critical dilemma of finding a means of abandoning his prior utilization of shallow cubistic space; the urge was now strong to puncture the surface of the picture plane. To Waderton's eyes, de Chirico was a master of esoteric mystery without pretension, no doubt so obsessed with his technique and geometry as to be oblivious to the enigmatic atmosphere exuded by his canvases.





STIEG PERSSON STILL LIFE PANEL (Detail from OUR FAITH PART 1: THE CASE FOR AND AGAINST COLOUR) Oil on masonite Private Collection, Melbourne

*At the end of the jetty* demonstrates the flowering of David Wadilton's self-instructive technical dialogue with a chosen master. Drawing on his chiaroscuro-steeped, firmly modelled drawings, the *Jetty* benefits from a rediscovery of scale and sombre colouristic tones derived from contemplation of de Chirico. Rather than quoting or paraphrasing any work of this precursor, the canvas responds to the mysteriousness of the Surrealist artist in a vein of personal commentary. The only obvious appropriation here is of objects from the kitchen, magnified and moved into a context which makes them curiously useless; coupled with them are bizarre blow-ups from nineteenth-century engravings of protozoa, miniscule life forms that here assume a leering and potentially violent character. The aggressiveness of this stacked still life is belied, though, by the loving, delicate touch with which each object is painted. Wadilton's reticent, caressing stroke produces a highly ambivalent effect.

Stieg Persson's recent art has also appropriated an old master style rather than quoting specific imagery. But his 1986 United Artists exhibition, 'Our Faith Part 1, The Case For and Against Colour,' was designed as a thorough

slap in the face for the very notion of appropriation — with a solid message attached.

From his earliest darkly poetical beginnings, Persson has always freely appropriated numerous low art sources; wallpapers, topography books, Chinese imperialist posters, Victorian prints of seaside resorts, steel-engravings of coyly posed animals — all were grist to his mill in a conscious effort to avoid imagery obviously identifiable with the high art milieu. The popular thought of past eras, expressed cheaply and pragmatically in monochrome media, matched Persson's rejection of colour as the tool of traditional academic painting and his fascination with a graphic black and white style. His use of blackboard paint stained straight into raw canvas, a technique which demanded intense pre-planning and absolute precision, also deliberately negated the very exploratory process of painting. An unchangeable surface and severely ascetic palette were both vehemently anti-painting in intent.

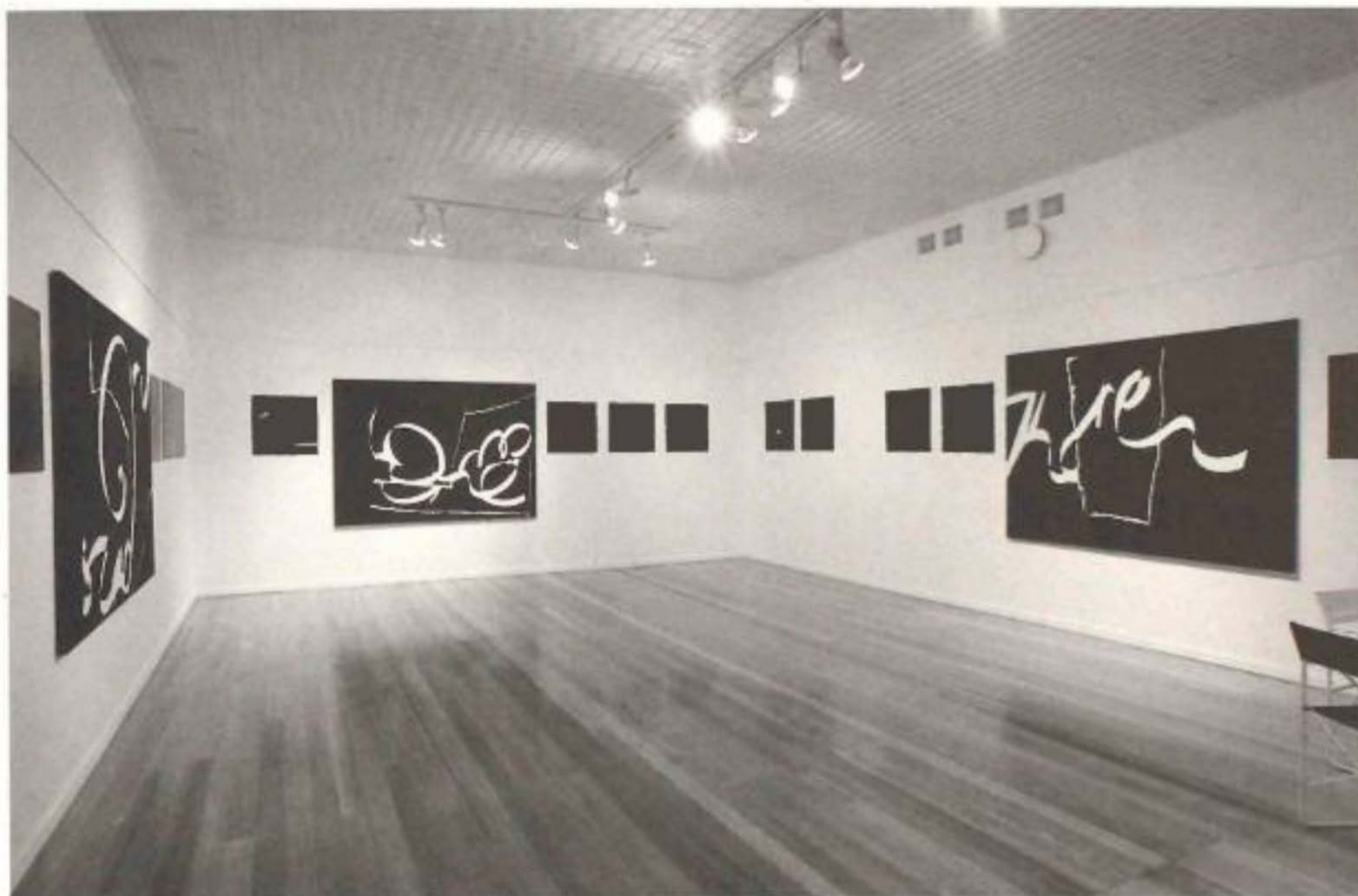
With his dramatic 'Our Faith Part 1' exhibition, Persson threw both the tradition he had rebelled against and the style he had rebelled with together into dynamic confrontation. Large abstracts stained directly into reversed canvas and deriving from the great modernist tech-



STIEG PERSSON CUPID IMAGE from 'OUR FAITH PART 1: THE CASE FOR AND AGAINST COLOUR' 1985-86 Oil on masonite 60 x 60 cm Collection of the artist

nique of collage presented virtually 'pictures' of paintings in the modernist style. Juxtaposed with these raw, vital abstracts along walls of thematically conjoined works, smaller panels deployed still life vignettes — lovingly glazed and built up colouristically from a monochromatic ground with true academic precision. Though these almost manically fondled and minutely manipulated panels were executed after studio-staged still lifes the style was deliberately appropriated from the Dutch seventeenth century still life tradition. Having arranged his vegetable set-pieces, Persson then forced himself into an understanding of the technical processes by which his Dutch precursors had coaxed their homely visions into artistic materialization.

Persson chose the still-life format as a workable example of good, straight bourgeois commercial painting. He was clearly tempted to make parallels concerning art commercialism, between seventeenth-century Holland and the present situation in Australia; both times are marked by a plethora of artists and a market insufficient to guarantee them all a living. At the same time he was eager in his surprising still-life panels to point to a continuing misconception that craft is the 'enemy'. Contemporary



STIEG PERSSON OUR FAITH PART 1: THE CASE FOR AND AGAINST COLOUR installation shot 1985-86 Oil on masonite, oil and blackboard paint on reversed canvas. Private Collection, Melbourne

artists, clinging to the notion that 'progressive' art is de-skilled, still too often see craft as decadence. Persson set out, ironically, to create a show that was highly crafted, but in a manner that was heavily theoretical. Dotted along his carefully orchestrated walls, jet black panels were hung; seemingly imbued with a potentially vulnerable aura, they quietly asserted a strong personality and independence through their sensitive paint application. No two panels were alike. Brushstrokes and lovingly varnished paint layers gave off a message in themselves, as abstraction put forth an intensely crafted front.

'Our Faith Part 1' alerted the viewer to a genuine perversity in the actual process of appropriation itself as well. Persson mercilessly sent up the obsessively historicizing nature of

contemporary culture, underlining a situation where traditions are virtually 'made up' to fill the demands of a backward-glancing trend.

The opening *Cupid* panel — the only directly quoted image on display — presented a dash of Victorian repressed sexuality drawn from the crypto-erotic photography of Julia Margaret Cameron. The high culture figure of Cupid, debased to the level of prurient Victorian soft pornography, was once again turned back into a high art icon. The air of perversion about the whole cycle furnished the central leitmotif for Persson's beautifully black theorizing. Notions of the negation of history by the modernist era, both the severing of historical links and a current inability to deal with history, inevitably come to the fore. Dislocated, mildly distraught and happily deviant, Stieg Persson's

swing to appropriation highlights the danger that painting may be unable to recover from the mushroom cloud of Modernism, and as a socially redundant form of activity may well be moving towards the same aesthetic fringe status as poetry.

For the artists considered here, appropriation is no co-ordinated movement or ready-made automaton aesthetic, but instead a series of individual responses to the figurative liberation of eighties pluralism. Inevitably part of their time and milieu, Lowe, Wadellton and Persson yet turn to art-historical quotation as a highly inventive and personal means of expression.

Ted Gott is studying on a Harkness Fellowship in Europe and the USA.