

## Michael Fox interviews Richard Dunlop for Super Art Business

*Last week I had the pleasure of discussing Richard Dunlop's upcoming show at Jan Murphy Gallery, Brisbane with the artist himself.*

Michael Fox (MF) – As an artist who spent his formative years in Brisbane I am curious to discover the source of your dark paintings?

Richard Dunlop (RD) – Years ago, in the early nineties, I had a studio under a house at Windsor. I lined the open wooden slats with black garden plastic to keep the dust and rain out. Many works of animals and plants back then ended up with a black ground, because that was what I was looking at all the time. My work travels in cycles and this is a returning wave.

MF – How about your *Classical Arrangements*?

RD – They're fragments of memories sequenced and integrated on the one surface. As authors arrange words to evoke an emotional response from an audience, likewise paintings are artificial constructions... just as a garden is a representation or fictitious organisation of nature. Hopefully, they may resonate with, or awaken some similar memory for others.

MF – A striking motif that has appeared in your recent work are what may be described as the *Blind Fish* – what's happening there?

RD - There are colonial paintings of catches of fish in the Art Gallery of SA. I love their overlapping and daring compositions, and the sense of wonder that they would have experienced landing species of fish they had never seen before. I linked that to my childhood fascination with blind Mexican "walking" fish, something I had never seen before and viewed with awe.

MF – I must say the AGSA is one of my favourite state galleries. Talking of things state (and I'm referencing artists like Man Ray here) I notice the show at Jan Murphy contains some lovely violin pictures.

RD – They are about having sympathy for the grain, and the humanity invested in their carving. There is also an obvious relationship to human (feminine) form. As with classical music, however, there is not a literal explanation as to what this actually "means". Classical music gains meaning from our reaction to an arrangement of sounds and silences (the silences equate to the modulated blacks of the paintings). I think it is an unnecessary distraction for art

to be "explained".

MF – And then at the other end of the spectrum you investigate the *momento mori* through the iconography of the wreath.

RD – The wreath is an arrangement associated with celebrations (like horse-races) but more often with death, and a favoured motif of mine since 1987. There is the contrast involved in the frail arrangement of cut flowers against the permanency of death or the reminder of the inevitability of our mortality. They are expressions mostly of love, but also invariably grief and loss. Similar concerns are expressed, but on a more overtly public level with my paintings about funerals for leaders.

MF – You have spent time in Europe but I find your *Spanish Dancer/ Spanish Arrangement* pictures to be something a bit more personal: Would you agree?

RD – You're right in that these works are not to be taken as strictly geographic. They really came from an interest in how sensuality finds unique cultural expressions and can be communicated in elaborate non-verbal ways (which is what a painting is capable of doing too).

MF – Returning to your Brisbane origins are your beautiful and now iconic reef arrangements.

RD – As a child I used to be parked for hours at the old museum at Bowen Hills, looking at the arrangements/ displays of PNG artifacts, or animals, and I used to wonder if you arranged them differently, would they tell a different history? Nature itself, of course, was made a commodity, arranged to serve particular ends. Still is.

MF – You're known primarily as a painter but the (Jan) Murphy show includes some objects in the form of the *Crab pot* and other ceramics.

RD - I've made (but rarely exhibited) ceramics since 1995. In this case, it's an antique Turkish olive jar which has been painted in professional oil paints (which soak into the porous terracotta in a way I was seeking to achieve), and then glazed and re-worked in a few layers over several weeks, in the same way an oil painting would be "built-up".

MF – Is this show a departure from being a botanical artist?

RD – I used to paint a form of horizon-less landscape with abundant plants, painted while living at Maleny on bush block. It was an update of Fred Williams' horizon-less outback images. I've since been typecast as a botanical artist, but I'm nothing of the sort. I actually have an abiding interest in natural history and in resuscitating or 'hybridising' traditional genres of art.

I like blurring the edges of them (particularly still life and landscape traditions), and if there's a political edge, it involves my interest in the disappearance of cultural habits and traditions, and my belief that there are grand unifying and cyclic themes in nature if we pay attention. I like 19th century theatres of nature – zoos, conservatoriums, hothouses, and yes, botanical and animal etchings.

Etching with a nail into paint has been done by artists including, Rembrandt (self-portrait hair), Matisse (most portraits), Braque and Picasso, and most Spanish artists, from Tapies to Barcelo. It is a common painting technique, and a common etching/ printmaking technique in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Long before that, it was used by ceramicists as far apart as the South Pacific and Africa. I started using it for botanical subjects and animal skulls, while I was living in south-west Queensland in the mid-80's (travelling in a job from Dalby to Thargomindah) and first exhibited them in 1985.

Richard Dunlop's exhibition opens at Jan Murphy Gallery on 17 April and continues until 5 May.

The interview was conducted by Michael Fox for Super Art Business.