

Fiona Gunn & Frances Joseph

3 x 2

April – May 1997

The Physics Room

2 Cents: Unevenly Spaced Felicity Milburn

The success of good installation hinges on the tenuous and often uneasy relationships between the artwork (and, hence, the artist), the physical area it occupies, and the viewer. Activating and redefining that space, for both the body and the mind of the visitor, must be the overriding intention. Two exhibitions held recently at The Physics Room, *arcanum*, by Fiona Gunn and *Attached*, by Frances Joseph (both part of the ongoing 3x2 Series) proved to be succinct examples of what works and what doesn't in one of the least perimetered fields of contemporary practice.

Gunn's work stylishly illustrated the point that installation doesn't have to reach out and bite you to be interactive. Entering a darkened room, drawn in by the sporadic whirring of a cast, suspended chair, *arcanum* engaged both physically and psychologically. This was work that invaded both your personal space and the corridors of your mind, which continued to turn over the possibilities long after leaving.

The written material supplied outside Gunn's recondite room included a delicate piece of aphorism by Clarice Lispector: "But if I wait for understanding to accept things, the act of surrender will never take place". And to enter was to surrender, to commit oneself, at least for a moment, to a world in which you had no bearings or control. A chair was provided, but it was one in which even the most athletic or determined visitor could never sit. The windows were snugly buffeted, and admitted only the dimmest of lights. Comfortable reason was turned on its head and the traditional rules did not apply.

Such a surrender is, necessarily, an unsettling experience and Gunn's room reverberated with a mysteriousness that bordered on the sinister. The graunching mechanism that powered the chair's sudden, shuddering rotations only added to the surreal atmosphere, completing each stage to face in a different direction, but always operating from the same fixed axis. The windows were stuffed with what appeared to be pillow innards, gently but firmly corseted into place by diagonally crossing threads. These served the purpose of rendering the windows useless, and of filtering a strange and unearthly light into the room, but they also brought to mind the wakeless nights of an insomniac, pillow after pillow fending away the light and always the noise of the chair, like the lurching inconsistency of a ticking clock in the darkness.

The Physics Room's name is conducive to wordplay, and Gunn made reference to several possibilities here, the plain school chair alluding to both the ceaseless boredom of a university lecture and the physical logistics of suspending a chair from the ceiling. Gunn's work isn't couch-potato stuff, it seeks to involve you and make you work - promoting the kind of sweat-inducing mental adventure that surrealists like Magritte dreamed up when they went in search of the *jamais vu*, the 'never before seen' in the most banal of everyday objects.

Perhaps it was just because Gunn's cryptic understatement demanded such complete attention and participation that the work in the next room appeared to be well, a little low-impact. Lazy is a mean word to use about anyone, especially a new kid in town, but it seemed to me that the multi-coloured jumble that made up *Attached* suffered from a lack of cohesion and impetus all too amply suggested by the limp assortment of clothing with which Joseph had covered the gallery's floor. If lazy is too cruel, perhaps half-hearted is a better description. The premise was nice, based on a kind of homesick smuggling of treasured possessions across the Tasman, but it didn't translate visually, and suffered by being too near such a strong work as Gunn's. If *arcanum* was active, *attached* was passive, and it produced minimal energy for the viewer to return.

Linking the diversely sourced materials with the famous patchwork quilt of the Canterbury Plains, *attached* also made reference to the stubbornly human insistence upon clinging to material possessions in an attempt to somehow slow the passage of time. Ultimately, despite the presence of the ubiquitous Michaelangelo Creation of Adam T shirt and the flannel sheets in a pattern familiar to anyone who has ever been on a school camp in New Zealand, this was a personal experience. For the artist, I mean, as the fabrics she selected were either originally worn by her, used in costumes she designed, or associated with particular events or people in her life. Of course, it was possible to make your own connections, but the overall impression was less one of fond recollection than mild irritation at what appeared to be little short of self-indulgence.

Unlike the complete absorption created by *arcanum*, Joseph's work was vague and unfocused. Sure, you 'got' it (in fact, it was all earnestly spelled out for you), but the impact was limited, and it didn't really engage. Gunn's work succeeded predominantly because the artist remained present in spirit, the installation was alive around you, you were a part of it and, at any moment that door could have slammed shut.

With *Attached*, however, the artist had already left the building, the life was gone, and the trail was cold.