

Catalogue Essay: Bevan Honey at the Tin Sheds, Sydney University, June 2004

MAPPING LIFE

'Architecture shapes relationships and the materials we use to build things define the map of who we are.'

Bevan Honey is an image-maker. Over the past decade he has made many memorable images that reflect on his own life while commenting on the wider issues of living in the twenty-first century. A builder, a cartographer and a maker of flags he continues to explore the familiar as a way of coming to grips with the world he inhabits.

A recurring motif in his lexicon of images is the flag; symbol of unity and nationality, a rallying point for all that is good and bad in a country's national psyche. The Republican debate has drawn attention to Australia's flag and the importance we place on identifying ourselves with a symbolic representation of 'the spirit' of this land. Of course it is difficult to locate the complex meanings we all overlay or mine from such a huge continent onto one small piece of cloth. What if anything can resonate appropriately for twenty million people?

In his 1997 exhibition at the Lawrence Wilson Art Gallery, Honey selected the ubiquitous Eureka flag, the ram from the old two-dollar note, the Holden Monaro and the Tasmanian Tiger as key images to carry his reading of contemporary Australian society. The 'flags' he constructed from these images were the antithesis of an elegant fluttering coloured ensign, instead they were heavy, static, unable to move freely in the winds of change. His new series of flags are even more immobile.

The ominous grey forms protruding from the wall, punctured and menacing, although the product of the latest Iraqi War, represent our inability to solve problems without resorting to violence. Like wings of a fighter plane or parts of a military vehicle they stand as witness to the ever-present threat of war underpinning our obsession with preserving national identity and security.

Although initially a response to a parallel project to restore an old Valiant car the therapeutic process of rebuilding quickly developed into a catalyst for new artworks. Originally arising from the need to make and do rather than create 'art', the materials of the rebuilding process, the grey automotive paint, the functional holes punctured through, the flat non-reflective surfaces, took on powerful new meanings in light of the hourly announcements over the radio as Bush and Blair pushed us closer and closer towards war. Those grey components lying around the floor of his shed became imbued with a sense of dread at what was about to happen and their presence quickly became more ominous. Next door in his studio new forms grew in parallel with the rebuilding, the shapes borrowed from the automotive industry becoming more military, the holes punctured in the surfaces finely tooled so they became dense, dark voids. Their surfaces remained matt because although flags are about identity for Honey these banners did not reflect his beliefs. Importantly they were also fabricated by one human being, the result of honest toil, a single individual's response to the massive industrial might of the United States. The people from the Valiant community knew what they were immediately, they understood where they had come from, though the other readings Honey had built into them were not so easily disentangled.

Maps are another key image in his lexicon and the process of mapping an important strategy in Honey's practice. A map of his life titled *Memory of Location* won him the Fremantle Print Award in 1993 while he was still a postgraduate student at Curtin University. The process of locating ourselves geographically, emotionally, intellectually and socially is at the core of our humanity and the network of lines that established the artist's identity in this print were the result of a cathartic outpouring. The physicality and directness of that process is echoed in his recent works on paper and in his plywood drawings.

Making a drypoint etching is not dissimilar from cutting directly into plywood with a router, though the metal is attacked more physically with a series of tools to create the

depressions that hold the ink. In the plywood drawings the lines trap only shadow. Cut to a depth of six to seven millimeters, the depth of a termite trail, the lines penetrate the layers of ply to reveal what lies embedded. The fabricated board is a cultural product, the routed line undermines our sense of security, that's why these works lean against a wall, the board vulnerable to continuing termite attack.

Honey's choice of subject matter for this series is the suburban environment so many of us inhabit. Although seemingly solid and permanent our houses are built on sand and as a result our hold on this place is less secure than we might imagine. At the same time we are in danger of destroying what we have. This idea had its genesis while he was undertaking an artist-in-residency at Guilderton on the Moore River north of Perth. In response to the opening up of the area to development Honey made a huge drawing on one of the pristine sand hills. Meticulously created by pegging down fluorescent tape his forty by twenty seven thirty-nine metre drawing of a typical suburban bungalow, complete with gables and carport, read convincingly as a new house arising out of the sand, just as the developers were threatening.

The routed lines incised into board have now replaced the delicate tape pinned to the earth but the message is the same, they are both a record of our present condition and a map of our future.

In a similar way the marking of a sheet of paper with charcoal, again and again, to establish a solid, indelible line, necessarily defines and locates meaning. In *Apple Tree – Split I & II (Arbiter)* we are presented with another kind of portrait map, this time based on an early nineteenth century horticulture book describing when to plant. Honey chose the apple tree from its myriad illustrations because of its colonial overtones and of course because of the Garden of Eden. A portrait of the artist as well as the tree itself the image is split then flipped and mirrored to create a good and bad side. Invariably one image seems benign the other demonic and in the space between there is room for reflection.

Building is another continuing theme in Honey's work. The architecture of friendship and

human interaction pervades his practice. Whilst in discussion about the exhibition at the Tin Sheds he was struck with the similarity between the original gable pitch of the gallery and the roof structure of his own studio. It was a resonance he needed to document, a link that needed to be made between the studio and the gallery, both sites of critical importance to the artist. Structure is a central concern in all the artist's work and the roof truss is a powerful metaphor for the kinds of structures that shape our lives. Vaulted, often hidden, the support mechanisms for the roofs that protect us become infused in his work with a sense of security. It's what holds us together, what provides the space for our human interactions, our work and our family lives.

The final work in the exhibition amalgamates some of these ideas. Although at first glance nothing more than a pre-fabricated wooden folding chair, it is a carefully made model from an original given to the artist by a neighbour, John Henry Harrison.

Exchanges happen while seated, friendships grow, ideas are shared, and plans are made. The chair itself becomes a rallying point, something that brings people together, a simple tool that can take many different forms but always with the same intent. It supports and provides an opportunity to rest or exchange but in this case it is full of potential, an exchange about to happen once it is taken down from the wall where it hangs.

This 'chair' was constructed from a map plotted from the original, each form carefully described then recreated and fixed together. It is well made, considered and strong, a familiar object made unfamiliar and strange by its new setting, though redolent with the nature of suburban life, of neighbours and friendship.

In his current exhibition Bevan Honey celebrates his joy in making, his commitment to finding his place in the multiple worlds he inhabits and his determination to look below the surface to reveal present and continuing threats. In the process he is mapping his life.

'The making of art fits into a crack in my life, not the other way around'

Ted Snell
April 2004