

BETTE MIFSUD

Hallucinations and Other Facts
Contemporary Art Centre

MELANIE HOWARD

Recent works
Anima Gallery

... the artist becomes a manipulator of signs more than a producer of art objects, and the viewer an active reader of messages rather than a passive contemplator of the aesthetic or consumer of the spectacular...

Hal Foster, *Recordings*

THE INSTALLATION 'Hallucinations & Other Facts' by Bette Mifsud contains at its heart the seeming contradiction of the illusory and the real. What could seem less real, less factual than that which is the product of hallucinations? Yet here Mifsud is presenting hallucination as equitable with fact: one fact amongst many.

Hallucinations being the apparent perception of an object or objects not actually present, they are essentially associated with linked acts of sight and imagination. Perception itself is a compound involving intellectual recognition and evaluation as well as the physical, mechanical processes of vision. Mifsud's work engages all of these aspects, binding them together with the photocopied frieze of magnified butterfly sperm. It is what Mifsud calls a 'collective journey' of individual and mass perception but one that is perpetually at a distance once removed; the key is her insistence in the simultaneous merging and division of 'concurrent vessels of historic and individual understanding'.

Presenting hallucination as an aspect of fact and employing the contrary motion of union and separation as complementaries might seem problematic and contentious in purely logical terms. Mifsud overcomes this not by some fluke of reasoning but instead by focusing upon the distorting and ambiguous aspects of representation and reproduction; the effect is to highlight the unreliability of perception and to emphasise the role of technology (as a propellant) in this process.

All of the components of Mifsud's installation are the product of mechanical (technological) means of reproducing an image. At one end of the room is a photographic aerial scan of the Murray

River and at the other end is a series of colour photocopies of the painting *Rinaldo in the Garden of Armida* by Jean Honore Fragonard; the two are connected by the butterfly sperm frieze which is both a photocopy and a cell magnification; and by the exit is a faint pair of photocopies of a picture of the Arc de Triomphe.

The most immediately apparent relationship operating within the space is that between the aerial scan and the colour photocopies of *Rinaldo*... There are surface similarities of pattern and quality of colour as well as their echoing grid formats, but most important is the uncertainty; how each should be viewed; whether they should be viewed from a distance or close up. In this respect these two pieces are visually teasing, leaving the viewer in doubt about their status. Are they actually images or do they only seem to be?

The frieze of butterfly sperm and the Arc de Triomphe contain similar points of uncertainty. Butterfly sperm is not usually perceived as a solid (or even perceivable) entity yet here it is transformed by two stages of technology. It has become something else, but is still connected to its original form. The Arc de Triomphe, one of the most substantial or monuments to a single person's egomania is (also by two steps of technology) transformed into an ultimately intangible image.

Rex Butler makes a bold statement in his introductory essay 'Bette Mifsud: The Abduction of Sight', that Mifsud is 'not representing something seen but presenting the very act of seeing itself'. This is too strong a claim for the work, pushing Mifsud's undeniable pre-occupation with modes of perception further than is comfortable and certainly far beyond Mifsud's own brief notes.

In 'Hallucinations & Other Facts' the onus is on the viewer and critic as much as upon the art practitioner. If the viewer is not prepared to enter into that particular pact the installation is left isolated within its self constructed framework. This is not a criticism, but a (pre)condition of the work: it is consistent with Hal Foster's analysis of the common component in the increasingly combative arena of 'new' art.

Melanie Howard's recent works are not so readily categorised, because they do function on a passive as well as an active level, and successfully too. The viewer can

take the (soft) option as 'passive contemplator of the aesthetic'. This does make Howard's paintings viable commodities and affiliate them with a bourgeois art market, although not in the sense that Barthes defined bourgeois as one 'unable to imagine the Other' (*Mythologies*, 1957): Howard's work has always had a very strong sense of the 'Other'.

On this passive level, her paintings are silent and still, very beautiful to look at. They are the product of a calm mind. Interestingly, Howard's work is as much concerned with the scientific (technological) as Mifsud's, and with the way that we look at things. Howard believes that there should be no split between Science and Art. Her previous work has dealt with the art practices and images of other cultures, but in this she has returned to the traditions of European culture: our own nineteenth and twentieth century histories and particularly post-Industrial Revolution utopian philosophy. What she is seeking is the purity of thought of young (if naive) thinkers and her concern is in both art and science retaining both a logic base and a belief in a dream.

Despite the Eurocentricity of Melanie Howard's recent work, she has retained some of the habits and qualities of her previous interests in non-European cultures. One of these is the fascination of playing with pattern making, of creating lots of canvases reflecting an image. Howard's work does not in any way doubt the certainty of forming an image in the way that Mifsud does. She is not trying to question the process of image making. This is not to say that THE image is Howard's tool; she is too oblique for that. Instead Howard builds the body of her work up by subtle restating and variation.

These two exhibitions are approaching art practice from different perspectives, but are not necessarily hostile to each other's concerns. Mifsud's work is by implication questioning the premise of established art practice: to question the very act of perception is to question also what is being perceived. Howard's work on the other hand is proof that there is still vitality in more conventional forms of art practice, that the (thinking) production of 'art objects' can still be valid.

ADRIAN WESTON