



Hany Armanious

Art Nouveau Barbeque

Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Sydney
roslynoxley9.com.au
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The significance of the title of this exhibition, *Art nouveau barbeque*, is not immediately apparent, but it is indicative of the ungainly beauty and weird humour that one has come to expect in the work of Hany Armanious. Just as evident in the exhibition is a palpable sensation of uncertainty; a quality that I did not realise was also characteristic of Armanious' work until I saw this show. One might expect a degree of hesitancy in this body of work, the artist's first display since his exhibition [at Sarah Cottier Gallery] was slammed by critic Benjamin Genocchio two years ago, but there is no lack of confidence here. Rather, Armanious precipitates a form of ambiguity in which his works hang on the edge of decisions, uncertain of their own identity. Armanious has made an art of equivocation.

Excepting the work of students yet to evolve a mature style, it is customary for an artist to settle on a theme or explore a set of forms and present the results in a single show. For all of the bravado of the title, there is no master story in this exhibition and Armanious trials a variety of forms and different approaches. In works like *Muffins* or *Walnut walls*, Armanious evokes his earlier works and their backhanded homage to pop art. The use of the hot melt resin in the poisonous looking walnuts is classic Armanious, but here he aims for super-realism rather than abstract effect. The engorged and bloated 'muffins' are made from expanding foam, much like that used by Frenchman César in the seventies, and arranged in a slouching, disordered installation. The only other reference to food is the mirror-writing on the funky boudoir, *One-Way street*, which advertises 'free muffins'. Nearby, a group of portraits, 'drawn' with carefully arranged strands of the subject's hair, attends the barbeque. These are curious and obsessively crafted, the curliness of the hair logically determines the vitality and structure of the portrait, as an expression of the unique DNA blueprint of the sitter.

The same quirky humour fuels what appears to be pictures of the universe. But these images of the heavens pay tribute to Armanious' devilry rather than to any spirituality: they consist of clogged sandpaper, which the artist has rubbed against a white wall, embedding white flecks like so many galaxies. Strangely effective, the sandpaper conjures up both the futility of life and, like William Blake's description of a world in a grain of sand, its transcendental beauty. [The celestial experience is picked up in a video, *Dung beetle realigning planets*, but this elicits only 'nice plasma screen'.] Interspersed with the portraits are five sculptures of melted and stretched white plastic, as rhapsodic as Isadora Duncan's veil dance and as mindless as a late de Kooning bronze. These sculptures, *Basic instruction* [#1-5], highlight the recovery of a visual/tactile aesthetic pioneered by

Armanious. He delights in his eclectic materials, allowing them to speak and dictate form, rejoicing in sensual appearance as much as the sensation of handling. As an artist, he is promiscuous in his choice of materials and easily lead by ideas suggested by the medium.

Armanious' work appears to hover outside the conventional visual debate, rather than as a calculated anti-aesthetic from a one-time bad boy. Armanious has moved from rebellion against the market, part of the strategy of grunge art when the engineered crudity and infantilism of his hotmelts became formula, almost a trademark. Instead, Armanious confronts us with the painful sincerity of uncertainty, an interesting contrast with the jejune innocence that Linda Marinon [whose show was adjacent] gives her work.

Armanious' work is genuinely comic, but like the schoolyard wimp, this is the cover for unsettling sensitivities. His black humour is that of a Will Self or an Irvine Welsh but is also very Australian in its tangled, long-winded and self-deprecating commentary. His intellectual anti-intellectualism finds a voice with *The mess inside and the conceit of distance*, which consists of a hand-painted version of Edvard Munch's *Scream* and a rotating black and white hypno-disk fixed onto a cement mixer. After-images from looking at the disk make the

painting roll and contort, and the archaic art form becomes 'interactive'. It is not an elegant work and while big on effect, seemingly teeters on the cusp of meaning. A comment on contemporary consumer expectations? Has a classic image been updated or dumbed down? The cliché of high art, mixed and served up as predictably as a Disney experience, evokes hilarity but ultimately melancholy. Wistful, anxious and modern; the uncertainty and equivocation of Armanious' work forces a reflective, humanist edge. Armanious, like all of us, navigates life between tears and laughter, locating his art somewhere between the glittering worldliness of art nouveau and the burning snags on the barbie. I was pleased to be invited.

HANY ARMANIOUS, *THE MESS INSIDE AND THE CONCEIT OF DISTANCE*, 2003
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Michael Desmond
