Train of Thought

DONNA FOLEY
Pinnacles Gallery Thuringowa
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A Catalogue of Works
in partial fulfilment of the requirements
for the award of the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

Thank you for your support
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Cover image: New Testament
Computer generated image incorporating digital photography
146 x 110 cm on canvas
Back cover: Lithographs from the Prophet and Acts Series
56 x 56 cms on Magnani Incisioni paper
Sounding Beneath The Surface

At first glance, the majority of the 13 elaborately manipulated and digitally generated print works that comprise the core of Donna Foley’s Train of Thought exhibition read visually like woven rugs or delicate silks from the Islamic Middle East. Following the dictates of traditional pattern making, quadrants of flipped and mirrored images are linked and assembled into complex but symmetrical relationships that ultimately reflect balance and harmony. Cascades of marks in both contrasting and complementary colours are meticulously arranged to suggest unity and wholeness.

Beware, however, of patterns. As the artist herself warns: “Patterns tend to lull the senses, even to go unnoticed.” The true effect of patterns can often be meditational, almost soporific, even misleading. They can be used to deliberately obscure meaning, to hide coded messages and impose a structured form on a much more fundamental truth.

Scratch away the mesmerising surface layers of pattern making in Foley’s artworks, and the viewer is ushered into another world of visual meaning that co-exists deep below. It is the world of the graffitists, the taggers, the writers who illustrate the abandoned and contested spaces in our modern urban environment with their calligraphic mark and message making. Like the structured forms that exist on the surface of these works, it is a world that has its own rules, its own patterns and its own meanings - meanings that relate to origin of language and the way that sound is visually represented in the written form.

In the beginning was the word and the word in this instance is derived from more than 3,000 photographs of graffiti, tags and writings taken by, or on behalf of, the artist Australia-wide between 2002 and 2004. From humble beginnings in a railway siding in Townsville’s Garbutt, the collection of source imagery has accelerated and accumulated to incorporate sites located in many of Australia’s major urban centres and even on the Nullarbor Plain. It includes cacophonies of richly coloured and intricately constructed aerosol painted tags that more resemble pages from the ancient Book of Kells or the most beautiful of illuminated medieval manuscripts; plaintive writings in simple cursive script, pleading their message on the walls of decaying inner-city industrial sites; ingenious stencil celebrations of the inspirational heroes and anti-heroes of popular culture, ranging from Ned Kelly to Johnny Cash.

Like the elaborately finished artworks in Train of Thought itself, Donna Foley has not been content to just obsessively collect, collate and reinterpret these images in their own loose, raw state. Rather she has spent much of the past three years investigating, analysing and structuring the vast amount of source material into a polemically cohesive body of work invested with a deeper level of understanding and new meaning. Guided, even at times subconsciously, by her own upbringing as a Roman Catholic, the artist has drawn together this seemingly disparate collection of anarchic source material into an intellectual and visual construct that echoes the Old and New Testaments of the Holy Bible – itself significant as the written record of a once totally oral culture.

The work The Book of Acts both celebrates the source material and most simply illustrates the process, the construct, the world-view that the artist has created as the basis for the exhibition. A bound artist’s book, it contains a selection of key images from amongst the thousands of photographs of the graffitists work - arranged and presented in a quadrant pattern that mirrors the form of the major digitally generated prints. It is divided into chapters or testaments with distinctly Biblical titles such as Apostolics, Commandments, Epistles, Kings, Palimpsests, Prophets, Psalmodies, Redemptives, Requiems, Soliloquies, Scribes, Transfigurations. It is both the imagery and the substance of these titles - and the concepts and intellectual concerns which have been developed and are implicit within them - that are visually translated and carried through on a much larger and ambitious scale to the more complex and densely structured major digital print works that comprise the core of Train of Thought.
Apostolics makes parallels between modern day graffitists and early Christian apostles. Persecuted and working at the margins of society, their ‘writings’ and ‘testaments’ are always in danger of being obliterated (or simply painted out) by the authorities. Epistles looks at graffitists with a message to convey; moral expressions about war, death, love and sex are common themes. Commandments focuses on strong statements, commands to action (graffiti as verb). Redemptives is, of course, about saving and includes for example stencils of Christ and the line “Jesus Saves”!

Kings, on the other hand, explores hierarchy within the graffiti world and the role of the top taggers. Their works are protected from lesser mortals by images of crowns, “KO” abbreviations (Kings only) and simple messages such as “Don’t Cap”. Scribes reveals common tags such as AKE, DOPE, SOFLE, DUD and JUICE that are seen throughout Australia, from Townsville to Melbourne and beyond. Palimpsests uncovers graffitied surfaces that are re-painted by authorities, only to be re-worked by keen taggers. Requiems testifies to the widespread, often very large pieces dedicated to graffitists who have died (“RIP Bingo”); and so forth.

Patterns abound in and are instrumental to an understanding of Donna Foley’s work in Train of Thought. On a superficial level, they dominate the symmetrical quadrant structure of assembled imagery in the major works and make them so readily interpreted as traditional woven rugs or silks. On a deeper level, however, there is a more fundamental form of pattern making that Foley is investigating through this exhibition. This is the pattern of sound or, more correctly, the pattern of sound as it is visually represented in the written form of language.

In the exhibition and the Doctoral thesis which accompanies it, Foley argues that the hand-written, pre-print form of language more accurately reflected – in a visual sense - how it was spoken, felt and, above all, sounded. In the transformation from an oral/visual culture, to a hand-written culture, to a print culture with its emphasis on non-serif block type, this nexus between the oral and the visual has largely been broken.

Donna Foley sees modern graffitii (or more accurately, writing), as a latter-day renaissance of this ancient oral and visual culture. Influenced today by the sights and sounds of Hiphop subculture, its marks and patterns are most often expressed by rebellious youth operating at the margins of legal society and is an attempt by them to regain control of both the form and the meaning of language. It is this Train of Thought that has driven the artist on a journey from abandoned carriages in a railway siding in Townsville, to creating the major body of work which makes up this exhibition.

Sound is ephemeral. The written word as a more durable, tangible form of communication is both an object for visual interpretation and a representation of sound and acts as a visual intermediary between the communicant and the spectator.

Writing is the visual counterpart of speech. Marks, symbols, pictures, or letters drawn or written upon a surface, or substrate, become a graphic counterpart of the spoken word or unspoken thought. The limitations of speech are the fallibility of human memory and an immediacy of expression that cannot transcend time and place (Meggs, 1983:3)

Writing is the term the youth subculture HipHop and its forebears of late 1960s America employ to describe their practice of aerosol art using spray-paint and magic markers. Dubbed graffiti by the New York media and subsequently referred to as such by the authorities and the general public, writing has become an international expression of rebellious youth.

As communication the visual rarely operates on its own and this is also true of graffiti. The word audience is almost synonymous with spectator in meaning, yet distinguishes clearly biased preferences for auditory or visual strategies for communication. Thus graffiti could be seen as having two dimensions, a textual or calligraphic element akin to oriental mark making or medieval illuminated manuscripts, where seeing is a purely aesthetic, subjective or felt experience, and another where sound patterns relate to encoded letters written on the wall.

Graffiti is not only written by alienated teenagers, but over time has involved, and continues to involve, a multitude of practitioners with a host of motivations, in various forms and patterns, in various spaces. The use of visual patterns demonstrates how the subversive thoughts or ideas of one group are simultaneously illuminated in a conspiracy of silence whilst they may be incomprehensible to another culture. For example, it is claimed African slave quilts were coded aids for escapees through the Underground Railroad.

In Armenia, Turkey, the Caucasus, Central Asia, Iran, and Afghanistan, over a hundred different spoken languages do not have a corresponding written form; indigenous peoples who rely on oral traditions transcribe their emotions, histories and traditions by weaving symbols into carpets and textiles. Patterns tend to lull the senses, even to go unnoticed; consequently their significance is masked.

Since there can be no abiding city the need to transcribe private or collective thoughts into a tangible visual mode has become universal and adaptable. The print revolution, now embedded in our culture, evolved during the illuminated manuscript period between the 13th and 16th centuries through the reproduction of the classic texts of antiquity. It has caused a major shift from a Chirographic (writing) culture to a Typographic (print) one. While the former was an essentially oral culture, the latter is dominantly a visual culture. Today we process words visually without the necessity to think in sounds hence the challenge of spectotorship.

In the contested space that is the urban environment, harmonic and discordant patterns are created using the word as a weapon of domination and resistance, graffitists challenging the codes of orthodox behaviour and the voices of authority.

Donna Foley
Soliloquy #1 from the Book of Acts Various states
Computer generated image incorporating digital photography
110 x 110 cms on canvas
Commandment #1 from the Book of Acts Various states
Computer generated image incorporating digital photography
110 x 110 cms on canvas
Kings #1 from the Book of Acts Various states
Computer generated image incorporating digital photography
180 x 180 cms on canvas
Scribe #1 from the Book of Acts Various states
Computer generated image incorporating digital photography
110 x 110 cms on canvas
Scribe #2 from the Book of Acts Various states
Computer generated image incorporating digital photography
110 x 110 cms printed on canvas on Epsom inkjet
Scribe #3 from the Book of Acts Various states
Computer generated image incorporating digital photography
110 x 110 cms on canvas
Epistle #1 from the Book of Acts various states
Computer generated image from digital photography
110 x 110 cms on canvas
Epistle #2 from the Book of Acts various states
Computer generated image from digital imphotography
110 x 110 cms on canvas
Epistle #3 from the Book of Acts Various states
Computer generated image incorporating digital photography
110 x 110 cms on canvas
Prophet #1 from the Book of Acts Various states
Computer generated image incorporating digital photography
110 x 110 cms on canvas
Apostolic No. 2 from the Book of Acts Various states
Computer generated image incorporating digital photography
110 x 110 cms on canvas
Apostolic #3 from the Book of Acts Various states
Computer generated image incorporating digital photography
110 x 110 cms on canvas
Psalm #1 from the Book of Acts Various states
Computer generated image incorporating digital photography
110 x 110 cms on canvas
Redemptive #1 from the Book of Acts various states
Computer generated image incorporating digital photography
110 x 110 cms on canvas
Redemptive #2 from the Book of Acts various states
Computer generated image incorporating digital photography
110 x 110 cms on canvas
Transfiguration #1 from the Book of Acts Various states
Computer generated image incorporating digital photography
110 x 110 cms on canvas
Dulce Domum - 1200 techniques
Mixed media on canvas 180 x 180 cms
The Book of Acts
Artist book - sewn and bound in black leather in a box
800 pages in full colour

Acts - Lithographs on Magnani Incisioni paper
Various numbered prints
Acts No 8 Limited edition of 5
Acts No 11 various states

Train of Thought - Etching and lithography chvine colle on Hannamuhle paper
Limited edition of 5

Tag series - Print release, etching and stencil
Limited edition of 5 on Magnani Incisioni paper

Palimpsest series
Palimpsest No. 2 Limited edition of 5
Palimpsest No. 3 Various states and colours
Lithographs on Magnani Incisioni paper 56 x 56 cms

Acts - Requiem
Etching on Hannamuhle paper Edition of 5

Wide Brown Land and Palimpsest No.1
Computer generated images incorporating digital photography
Limited Editions of 5 on Art Paper 68 x 68 cms