



Sydney Symposium 2004

Keynote Address

Bea Maddock AM

As I step out of the studio I am a different person when I take on responsibilities in a social context. It is the same with the work. Once it leaves the studio for exhibition or collection it has to survive on its own merits with no further input from me. My responsibility to it could only last for as long as the idea of it was being processed in the studio. There can be no going back and no regrets. The material presence is fixed, as responsibility is handed over to dealer, collector or museum. If fate will have it returned to the studio it is perhaps the most precarious place for it to reside, for a work is made within a fixed time frame and I have moved on.

I want now to discuss these two places of responsibility; firstly the studio and then the museum and how there might be more links or possibility for dialogue between the two.

I have in my studio a large box of oil paints, some inherited from my parent's paint boxes while most were purchased after the destruction of the Macedon studio in 1983. I know precious little about the

actual paint in those tubes. I have a mental image of their colour when I read their label and for their composition I rely in blind faith on their trade names: 'Reeves' and 'Windsor and Newton'. I know nothing of their relative fugitive character or drying times beyond those that have gone rock solid in their tubes, but as Massy (1967) writes.

Today we have an abundance of packaged perfection in the highly developed colour palettes produced and sold by many scientifically directed paint manufacturers; new, improved synthetic products are also present in overwhelming numbers. Today's painters may gain from the ease of obtaining such excellent materials, but they sometimes lose in failing to experiment - trying different glazes and grounds, or cooking up an odd combination which they have never heard of before. Happy is the painter who discovers just the right materials or techniques to suit his particular temperament. [or idea.]

But surely a conservator will quake at this suggestion of experimentation. However, it often occurs in my studio when the projection of an idea cannot be

accommodated within a traditional mode of procedure. I will then launch out, often over an extended period of time; with a series of test panels or sheets as I did with the preliminary work for '*Terra Spiritus*'.

In contrast to my lack of knowledge of the composition of commercially manufactured paint I have in the past, notably when a student at the Slade School in London in the early sixties, been very aware of what went into the making of grounds and the hand-ground oil paint that I made because I lacked money and had the desire to work with thick layers of paint. Cheap dry pigments were available at the Covent Garden stage shop and these were ground with linseed oil on a marble slab with a muller. The paintings that survive from this period were very uneven; matt where the oil had been absorbed and shiny where it had remained on the surface, all due no doubt to the different absorption rates of the pigments. The paintings recently came out of storage and received a weak damar varnish to restore their original surface quality.

The Slade School also taught me how to make up etching inks by grinding powdered pigments; Frankfort black and heavy French, in varying proportions with light, medium or heavy copperplate oil to suit the printing of the impressions on the plate. This flexibility cannot be achieved from skin-laden tins of commercially prepared inks. Etching grounds and varnishes were also made up from raw materials and I returned to Australia from London with a supply of these which held me in good stead, as etching materials were unavailable here until the renaissance of printmaking in Melbourne in the mid-seventies.

In the mid-sixties in Launceston, I made a dramatic move to paint large six by four foot museum-sized pictures in a small attic studio. For this move I purchased tube colours and worked on composition-board panels nailed to crude pine cradles. The waxy surface of the masonite was painted with a commercial sealer and white undercoat instead of the traditional, half-chalk ground that I had previously used.

Surprisingly these paintings have survived intact apart from, in some cases, the radiata pine warping and twisting the panels. In the late sixties I started to use the acrylic paints that had come on the market. Little was known then about their composition or their behaviour and I was still using commercial white undercoat as a ground on both composition-board and canvas supports and also using it as a palette white. One of my favourite canvases of this period sadly shows the effects over time of this overlap of oil paint and acrylic. The advantage of using house paint on board was that I had a media that I could work into with graphite pencil and as the drying time was fast, I could move the work backwards and forwards in a similar manner to the way I worked with pencil or charcoal on paper.

1970 saw me migrating across Bass Strait to Melbourne to take up a position teaching printmaking at the National Gallery School; initially working with photo-process in screenprinting and lithography. I then concentrated on developing means for using photo-process with etching, seeking help from photoengravers working in industry and adapting the process to suit studio conditions. I later developed skills in darkroom photography to replace my previous reliance on commercially produced photographic transparencies and set up darkroom facilities in my studio, as well as establishing a photographic studio within the printmaking department at the Victorian College of the Arts. Later in the seventies, I became interested in using multiple etching plates for printing in colour and used the four-colour process for printing relief blocks on an industrial proofing press I installed in the Macedon studio. It was here that I also set up equipment for making handmade, recycled paper. Simple moulds and deckles had been purchased from Kayes Van Bodegraven and I made vats, drying racks and an Asian style press to make paper from discarded envelopes and off cuts of cotton paper, primarily for making artist's books. A larger 'mill' was set up in the Dunolly studio in the eighties after I had acquired a Hollander beater from America, made moulds and deckles and purchased

a large screw press. With this equipment I was able to make fine rag papers and experiment with New Zealand flax for making Asian style paper for printmaking. I had been interested in making artist's books back in the sixties when I made my first editioned book, using linocuts for images and text. I knew nothing about binding; simply tying the pages together and to hide the back printing of the blocks used rubber solution to adhere the edges of the Sumi paper pages. This proved to be disastrous over time, when the adhesive turned bright orange!

In the sixties I had taken a course in typesetting at the Launceston Technical College and with a small old- style platen press I was able to print my own catalogues and posters for exhibitions. In Melbourne, I made the editioned book *Colour* using tri-coloured, etched plates. By this time I had acquired some skills in book-making and used the Sumi style of binding for this work. Another book *Artifacts from Trommanner* was printed with etched plates and coloured, using monotype printing from the plates. Several boxed sets of scripted images were made, where the handmade paper sheets were subsequently dipped in encaustic wax.

Painting had been put to one side in 1970 and it was not until 1978 that I investigated my on-going interest in Jasper Johns encaustic painting. I began experimenting with a hot wax and damar varnish mix to try to establish a workable media for using over collage and acrylic paint on canvas. There was little information available at the time and my initial use of paraffin wax instead of beeswax has resulted in an early, large work deteriorating somewhat. These early mixtures were worked on and improved upon and used in the eighties for a major commission for the High Court in Canberra and later for a series of large panoramic landscapes that use the encaustic wax over paint, that was made from pigments ground in pure turps and applied to the canvas ground much in the manner of watercolour. Layers of the three primary colours were used to create the desired effect.

The last big shift in media experimentation came in the making of *Terra Spiritus* in the early nineties. I spent a deal of time and thought in determining the technique that I would use to create the circumlittoral, incised and editioned drawing of Tasmania. It was worked on 52 sheets of Magnani cotton paper with hand-ground Launceston ochre over blind letterpress and finished with hand-drawn script. It was made in an edition of five with one artist's proof, which was later used for the installation of the work in the Queen Victoria Museum and Art Gallery in Launceston which locally, is affectionately known as the QV.

To summarise my studio practice since student days, I guess I identify myself as an individual craftsman-artist, working on my own, inventing my own processes, and pursuing my own ideas with technical experiments when necessary, in painting, printmaking, pottery, paper-making, artist's books and to a lesser degree with 'unique state' objects and sculpture. Information for this diverse range of experimentation has come mainly from an expansive collection of books in my studio on artist materials and techniques; across time and from all media ranging from medieval manuscripts to computer Photoshop. Recently in the latter years, contact with the conservation department of the QV has short-cut the process somewhat and enabled me to have more confidence in the stability of the materials I am using.

To conclude my discussion of studio practice, I would like to acknowledge the help that I have received from many younger artists who have worked with me over the years as paid assistants: editioning prints, mounting, framing, making crates, binding books and boxes and assisting with the work on commissions. Their work often goes unrecognised despite my efforts to have their names included on exhibition wall labels. In chronological order they are Graham Fransella, Roger Butler, David Marsden, Illme Simmul, Ruth Groves, Richard Butler, Jeff Burgess, Denise Campbell and recently Keith Adkins, who made the bound boxes for *Terra Spiritus*

and Roy Mathers who made the crates. The situation for studio assistants is not unlike the earlier painter's workshop.

There is mutual trust in each other's skills without any compromise regarding the standard set to achieve the end result.

I want now to discuss art museums and their connections with practising artists.

The publisher's dust cover to Philip Fisher's book *Making and effacing art* states:

Philip Fisher charts the pivotal role the museum has played in modern culture, revealing why the museum has become central to industrial society and how, in turn, artists have adapted to the museum's growing power, shaping their works with the museum in mind.

and Andrew Sayers writing about *The Aboriginal Memorial* of 1988 in the National Gallery of Australia in Canberra points out that:

The location - in the national capital, in a city much inhabited by public memorials and symbolic of nationhood - is highly significant. So, too, is the fact that the Memorial is housed in a public art museum. In the latter part of the twentieth century such places become the most significant institutions of art in Australia, largely supplanting the artists' societies, art schools, and prize exhibitions of earlier generations as the focus for serious art discourse.

Fisher (1981) discusses the function of the museum as the organisation mediating between the realm of technology and that of art-making and consumption and he describes a major shift in both the theory and practice of the visual arts. Lucie Smith (1975) in *The world of the makers* outlines these changes further.

Essentially, what has taken place in the visual arts in the years since the Second World War is a gradual breakdown of categories. It might seem that this breakdown meant simply the abolition of the barrier which once divided painting and sculpture, so that what the spectator had to

deal with was an art object, whether in three dimensions or in two. On a second look, one is aware that the breakdown of categories extends much further than this. The visual arts are no longer purely visual - the artist ventures into any area that suits him. He makes use of sound and movement. Time becomes almost as important an element in his language as the modulation of colour and surface. His work is often "environmental" - that is it acts as a kind of surrogate for architecture. He raids the physical sciences and philosophy.

Unfortunately, barriers between art media still exist in museum culture. I was personally reminded of this in the late eighties when two State Gallery institutions in Australia had made reservations on a major work of mine that had been exhibited in a dealer gallery and a travelling exhibition. The reservations were subsequently withdrawn with the same reason given; the curators could not agree on where the work should be placed in the collections. There was debate as to whether the work should go to 'Prints and Drawing' or 'Painting'.

My first intimate connection with a museum came two years after returning to Tasmania from study abroad. I had recently resigned from lecturing at the local Teacher's College in Launceston and had assembled an exhibition of 142 works in a large vacated shop in the centre of the city. Margaret MacKean Taylor (then Margaret Mackean), had recently been appointed as the first curator of Fine Arts at the Queen Victoria Museum and Art Gallery and after visiting the exhibition she acquired works for the collection. Collaboration with the institution was on-going in the sixties with one dual exhibition with Tony Woods and a major survey exhibition of my work in 1970. We also collaborated in drafting new courses for the local Technical College Art School where I was teaching ceramics, printmaking, and drawing; Margaret was teaching night-school drawing. She was also instrumental in organising the loan of a nineteenth century copperplate press from a local printing firm for use in my studio and initiated the restoration of an Albion press from the Museum for use in

the Technical College Art School. Both presses are now back in the QV collection.

More recent contact with the Museum came with the making and exhibiting of *Terra Spiritus*. The museum's conservation department was involved early on when I sought information regarding the suitability of the fixative I intended to use for the work. Vicki Warden in paper conservation worked with me on the ideas for presentation in the Museum and organised the mounting and framing of the work. I will leave Lynda Black to expand on that project and my collaboration with the QV, in her talk on Friday.

In the past three and a half years my involvement with the QV has been ongoing and intense. In November 2000, Therèse Mulford initiated the idea of extending the type of information she had put together on the *Terra Spiritus* work to include work held in the QV collection and early work, that I still had stored in my studio. This idea was expanded when Bridget Arkless (then Bridget Sullivan) was appointed as Curator of Fine Art. She suggested that the project take the form of a traditional catalogue raisonné. The work began when Therèse taped interviews with me over a period of three months. The chronology began to take shape while she was on leave in the UK and we were comparing drafts by E-mail. The project has continued despite, Therèse's departure from the QV. Decisions had to be made regarding the size of the project and it was decided that it would consist of two volumes with CD roms providing the means for illustrating the works. We are now in the latter stages of the first volume which includes works made up to 1983. It has been an absorbing task for me; fixing the chronology of the work. For I have always seen it as a continuing line; once describing it in a lecture as a 'paper chase', alluding to the game we played in a small country primary school, of laying paper trails for a group behind us who were trying to catch up and overtake us.

How can we bring about openness and dialogue between the studio artist and the museum conservator? Fine artists are

loath to expose their soft under-bellies; it is politically incorrect to talk about how you went about making a work in the art world. At exhibition openings the usual question directed to the artist is 'how long did it take to make?' As if that mattered. Then there's the problem of status. Making is often relegated to the lowest rank. As far as different media go, printmaking and the crafts are sometimes looked down on for their so called 'recipes'. Painters pretend that they put their work together by instinct. Artists appear to be hesitant about approaching conservators. Spare them the embarrassment and open the door if they deign to approach you about a 'making' matter.

I take the other side of the debate as an outsider; sensing a wariness of conservators to allow the artist in on the task of repairing their work. It is surely easier to deal with a dead artist than a living one as far as their work is concerned and I understand why you talk about a work of art as a neutral object. However, living artists do hold valuable information about how they made their work. They do have recipes hidden away in notebooks. They are generally shy, fragile beings underneath all the bravado. So let them know they are welcome if they are brave enough to call you up for advice or a chat.

I have appreciated the contact I have had in recent years, with the conservators at the QV in Launceston and would like to think that there will always be easy interaction and mutual exchange between artists and conservators in our Australian art museums in the future.

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AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Bea Maddock is one of Australia's most significant print-makers who has exhibited drawings, paintings and mixed media works since the early 1960's, including papermaking and bookbinding. Bea's work combines political engagement with a sensitive response to the landscape. Her seminal work, *Terra Spiritus...with a darker shade of pale* alerts the viewer that there is an alternative indigenous connection to the land to that of European history. She is presently collaborating with curators and conservators at the Queen Victoria Museum and Art Gallery, Launceston to produce a catalogue raisonné of her work.

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