

the art life

"...it's just like saying 'the good life'".

The Unbearable Weightlessness of The Art Life

Thursday, September 29, 2005

The Art Life is taking a short break and will return with an update on October 13. [For those of you who were teenagers in the 1970s, that's Rocktober 13]. Please note it in your diaries.



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The Frontier

There are few things more terrifying than going to an exhibition of a commercial photographer's "personal" work. Invariably the show will be beautifully shot and immaculately presented but unfortunately it usually also means the photographs are missing something. What that 'something' is, we can't really say. Sometimes the idea is too cloyingly obvious, sometimes it's all just technique, sometimes it's just boring, but whatever it might be, we think of commercial photographers work and its relationship to art in the same way we think of **Dolly The Sheep's** relationship to other sheep; very similar, but not the same.



Richard Glover, *Kellyville SP06/10*, 2005.

Giclee monochrome print, 100x80 cms.

Courtesy of the artist.

Luckily for [Richard Glover](#), his personal work also just happens to be his commercial work, and in his case, that fits brilliantly. Glover's work as a photographer of architecture has ranged from monumental projects such as his series covering the construction of the Tate Gallery from industrial ruin to industrial art palace, to a multitude of gleaming architectural constructions around the world. Recalling the great Australian artist photographers such as **Max Dupain**, **David Moore** and **Grant Mudford**, Glover's work is a cool, distanced, minimal and highly aestheticised recordings of modernist and post modernist constructions.

It's hard to think of a label for the houses of Sydney's outer suburbs where new housing subdivisions sit above the grey soil like prefab sculptures. Glover is showing two new series of works at The Tin Sheds Gallery, *Kellyville* and *New Suburbs*.

The [Kellyville](#) series, in a deathly black and white, records the completed streets of a new subdivision and its houses forlornly awaiting owners. The houses are a hybrid form of colloquial architecture, a little bit of everything melded together into a form that's meant to evoke 'homeliness' but could just as well be the setting for *Dawn of The Dead*. *New Suburbs* is an undefined location of a slightly older houses with gardens, lawns and parked cars, but are also absent of people and devoid of visible life. Although taken in Sydney, these images could come just as easily from that stretch of no mans land south of Perth, or in the subdivisions behind Byron Bay or the back blocks of Springfield on the NSW Central Coast.

Glover's pictures do two things very well. Firstly, they record these places without resorting to a moral position. Other recent contemporary Australian photographers have been this way but could not resist passing comment on place where they do not live. It may not be for everyone, but it's home for someone. Glover's images are also for the coming generation who want to look back on these venerable architectural masterpieces and wonder what they looked like when they were just built. Some may look upon these places as ghastly disaster zones of Ballardian sublimation, but for others, and perhaps the cognoscenti of the mid 2050s who will vie for these design classics in the walled cities of tomorrow - Glover's art is a masterful contemporary landscape art.

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[Who's Afraid of The Avant Garde](#)

The Performance Space is up to part three of their four part series of exhibitions of installation works for 2005, *Who's Afraid Of The Avant Garde?* **Tony Schwensen**'s installation works in March were Part One. We must have fallen asleep for Part Two and now Part Three is here with works by **Stephen Birch**, **Alex Gawronski**, **Astra Howard** and **Raquel Ormella**. [Part Four will be on in December and feature presents, games, cake and a visit from **Santa**. Hoorah!]

The sign outside the Performance Space says the show is called *Who's Afraid of The Avant Garde* without the question mark, turning what is meant to be a question into a statement. Perhaps it's an answer to the exhibition's titular inquiry, we don't know, but **Blair French** makes the argument in the exhibition catalogue that the whole notion of the avant garde – the tendency to radicalism that emerged in the mid 19th century - was discredited with the arrival of post modernism. He also claims that modernism's project of connection with socially progressive movements – social and political causes, radical aesthetic programs and so on – were separated from the artist's relationship to society in the 1980s and 1990s. These arguments are in part true, but only if you take a very selective view of the history of art over the last 20 or 30 years.

The title of this show is a kind of non-question because while it's possible to construct a lineage of shifts and movements in recent art history to back up French's claims, it's also possible to construct a counter history that is constant, with no breaks, purges or discrediting of one form, style or approach over another. To give just one example, as we noted in our review of *Disobedience*, the self conscious positioning of political art has been running uninterrupted since the 1920s in forms and approaches that have barely changed. So to the question of who is afraid of the avant garde, the answer is no one really, not in terms of either the kinds of art that is being made – and all of the works in the show are direct descendents of international contemporary art forms well known and loved for decades – nor in the works connections to their conceptual framing.

The Performance Space web site explains the project [this way](#):

Each project engages with avant-gardism in manners that suggest its reinscription as a paradigm for art and social action in the 21st century. Part 3 of this series comprises four newly commissioned installation works by NSW artists.