

# Embodied visions: invisible force in the works of Bernard Hardy

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Stephen Dedalus, the awkward young protagonist of James Joyce's epic novel *Ulysses*, is an awkward, obsessive, intense observer of all that passes before him. At one moment, in a point of near-hallucination, he begins one of the long, winding, obsessive sentences for which he is known, loved and loathed; this time, an epiphany on what and how we see:

Ineluctable modality of the visible: at least that if no more, thought through my eyes. Signatures of all things I am here to read, seaspawn and seawrack, the nearing tide, that rusty boot. Snotgreen, bluesilver, rust: coloured signs. Limits of the diaphane ...<sup>1</sup>

He seems to need to remind himself that these are embodied visions – that is, the vision proves its relevance to his Self when he 'knocks his sponce', or whether his 'five fingers fit through' a tactile object before him. Stephen's body is as 'ineluctable' and inevitable as are his visions. Like a teenager experimenting with acid, or simply too much beer, he – indeed the whole novel – roams in and out of his own awkward intellect, bodily lusts, and the humdrum of his daily existence in a strained, intense, but genuinely serious interrogation of body- and mind-in-the-world.

Bernard Hardy, a senior Canberra painter and teacher, who lost a significant proportion of his *oeuvre* in the 2003 Canberra bushfires (in Weston Creek), is not by any means the awkward and infuriatingly arrogant Stephen of Joyce's novel. Nonetheless, the intensity with which he navigates and sees the world is similar enough to make me think of the younger, fictional protagonist. In Hardy's paintings and prints, in his teaching and in conversation, he strives to illustrate the intensities emergent from within the material world, and from the artist's mind tracing them.

Even *Irides*, the simplest of paintings shown as part of his 2011 survey exhibition at M16, holds a *kind of blue* that iridesces the picture plane, as if an immanence or moving forward through the canvas. My reference to Miles Davis is intentional: just as Davis's *Kind of Blue* is a modal exploration of a long melodic theme, Hardy's is a moodal, textural, thematic riff on the *will to form* of these frilly-hooded creatures with yellow tongues – and of *that blue*, splayed against a background of violet.

Portraits such as *Artist and model* (2005), with its heavy lines and thick scumbled texture, draw out the subjects' thoughts and experiences. The portrait perhaps borrows its linear and textural force from Hardy's practice with linocuts and three-dimensional forms. The painting also nods to the palette and colour-intensities of Australian painter Herbert Badham (1899-1961), to whom Hardy explicitly refers in conversation. The faces of Hardy's artist and model become portals to a recognitions beyond their apparent youth, well beneath the surface.



Bernard Hardy, untitled/undated, mixed media; image courtesy the artist

The 'portal' is metaphorically represented in several works, such as *Window: girl portrait*. A small window high above the girls' left shoulder reveals a hill-scape representing a fragment of dream or memory. More literally, a series of works incorporate resin-moulds of eyes, ears, nose, even a pocket camera (glued to the painted surface) which act as lenses that magnify what we might see beneath the surface.

Three-dimensional modeling is featured in several works, including a rather rococo piece that locates *eyes* at the bust, *nose* at the navel, and *mouth* at the genitals of a woman's headless torso. Doves and cupids fly alongside, within the canvas frame. This piece holds a certain visionary hideousness, as do Pliny's *anthropophagi* (Shakespeare's 'men with heads beneath their shoulders'), also evident, for example, in Patricia Piccinini's mutated animals and people. For me, these associations highlight Hardy's capacity to embrace the grotesque, the gauche – dark and subsurface lurkings. The grotesque also makes its appearance in Hardy's *Mickey Mouse* series, where Mickey appears as pop poster-boy, or is more crazily paired with figures from Hardy's collection of porcelain and 'squeazy' toys.



Bernard Hardy, *Artist and model*, 2005, oil on canvas; image courtesy the artist

Although these pieces are whimsical, Hardy does point to de Certeau's idea that our sense of 'culture' (that is, 'who we are') is composed of the ways we use, combine and consume objects around us.<sup>2</sup> *We are* what we play with, play upon, and cast aside. I do not *like* these paintings, but I can sit with them, intrigued, for a very long while.

Other works I do, love, quite intensely, both in admiration of their painterly technique but also because of the thought moving through them. Interestingly, I am drawn to these, both in the gallery situation, but perhaps even more so in Hardy's home, on the domestic wall. This seems to whisper to my mind that the thoughts embedded in each work, though exacting, are not merely academic, an intellectual exercise. They are of high enough 'mettle'<sup>3</sup> to intrinsically relate to 'the stuff of which we are made'.

*Point and Line* (1998) alchemically links Rembrandt, Escher, and [p]op art via Hardy's curiosity about the eye which has moved through each of these histories. The piece is a contemplation of how colour, lines and thought co-exist and interweave in time.

Telegraph wires hint at communication across distance, space and time. The work pays homage to old master Rembrandt (and by association many other masters before and around him). The lower-right corner lip peels up from the canvas; the portrait's wiggly hair

echoes creases in the hands, whilst working hard against flat colour planes. The zigzag background, gradated in colour saturation, gives volume and depth behind the contour drawings of the hands.

For all these formal considerations, the work is yet humane, transfigured via an artist's alchemy. The telegraph wire – symbol of communication between bodies, hearts, and minds – wavers, becomes soft and human-hair-like, as it threads through the hands.

*Lattice* is similarly transformative. The dynamic of the skyscrapers' reflection on the car's surface polish contrasts with the ordered measure of the buildings, contrasted again by the detritus scattered in the left foreground. The artist's super-realist representation of the optics of reflection are yet held in tension against his manipulation of warm vs. cool, receded and foregrounded colour planes. Car, car-owner and painter are held to ransom; the requirements of the painting as object-in-itself hold sway. The piece, deliciously satisfying, is a kind of visual dating-game.

In Hardy's own words, 'Art is, in effect, a vector for publishing a mental event so that another may get in touch with the artist's creative concept'. Eye to eye, Hardy's recent survey exhibition was in all respects a serious date with this artist. In light of the fact that the works in this survey represented what survived, and were

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1/ Bernard Hardy, *Point and Line*, 1998, oil on canvas, 122 x 121.5cm; image courtesy the artist



2/ Herbert Badham, *The New Scarf*, 1934, oil on canvas on board, 34.5 x 31cm

created following, the devastating 2003 Canberra bushfires, it also functioned as ‘a restorative act, a gatherer of frayed memory strands’:

Curating this show said to me, in spite of the burning of a huge number of my works, that I *had said something*, if only to myself and a few others, decades ago. There was certainly a strong measure of the salamander in the show, the few works that I put in which predated 18 January, 2003, alive and well in contrast to the orange television images of that January that I still see in memory, let alone the fire itself.<sup>4</sup>

The survey exhibition thus represented a meeting between memory, presence, and hope, once and future time.

At his home Hardy shows me a small collection of burnt copper-etching plates, salvaged from the fire, which are scorched, thinned, razed in unpredictable ways, ghosted with the presence of both their previous designs and the firestorm which nearly eradicated them. Do they survive as a metaphor of the human mind?

The plates reveal a way of seeing that not even I, their etcher, could have predicted. One day in the interests of urban archaeology and cinerary revelation, I might do a reissue of their images. A test I did on some of them showed unexpectedly beautiful plate tones. Zinc plates on the other hand were little more than frozen puddles smelted on the studio floor.

Here, amidst the molten funerary possessions of our lives, we can witness what survives.

1. James Joyce, *Ulysses*, from the ‘Proteus’ chapter, first published by Shakespeare & Company, Paris, 1922.
2. French scholar (and Jesuit) Michel de Certeau (1925-86) proposes that everyday practice is the ‘investigation of ways in which users operate’; that its purpose is to ‘make explicit the system of operational combination[s] ... which also compose a “culture”, and to bring to light the models of action characteristic of users whose status [is] as the dominated element in society’; [www.eng.fju.edu.tw/Literary\\_Criticism/cultural\\_studies/decerteau.htm](http://www.eng.fju.edu.tw/Literary_Criticism/cultural_studies/decerteau.htm)
3. *mettle*: n., quality of a person’s disposition or temperament; natural ardour; spirit, courage; (var. of *metal*, ME f. OE, or L, f. Gk *metalion* mine).
4. For this and all following quotes, I am grateful for extended conversations with the artist.

*Bernard Hardy: A Survey of Works* was shown at M16 Artspace, Canberra, March 2011: [m16artspace.com](http://m16artspace.com)

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