

Reconciliations: A way of life

The word 'Reconciliation' can hardly be uttered in Australia without hearing the echo of loss that defines the experience of its Indigenous people. Ingo Kleinert has unreconciled aspects to his own history, some with an autochthonous basis while others are implicit in his art. He is intent upon resolution but is aware that it is this very dissonance that has given rise to the subtle metaphors that characterise his visual language.

With a Germanic background, Kleinert has spoken of wanting to obliterate his origins in order to erase any difference that might render perceptions of him less than totally Australian but he has also expressed a wish to confront and acknowledge his origins as a valid constituent of his autobiography. Kleinert traces his earliest interest in the exploitation of found objects that has become a key feature of his methodology to his postwar German childhood and the exploitation of recycled materials when his family constructed their own house near Eltham, Victoria in the 1950s. Visits to Montsalvat, built in mudbrick and stone in the late 1930s, through its artists and their children, and an introduction to Danila Vassilieff and his 1940s rock-walled 'Stonygrad' in north Warrandyte, via his role as art teacher, reinforced the recycling notion, this time with a decorative dimension. A later interest in the German collagist Kurt Schwitters gave a formal art historical dimension to assemblage as a visual way of life.

The nostalgic dimension of galvanised, or corrugated, iron has lent the works that form his oeuvre an implicit national identity that originates from its use as roofing for early Australian housing. In the art context, the weathered iron, selected, manipulated and re-laid by Kleinert can take on a regional differentiation that has its genesis in the rubbish tip from which it is collected. At some later stage in the process interpretations of that landscape may appear metaphorically as is exemplified in works in which the iron has a friability, splintering into thin filaments and bringing to mind the delicate texture and hues that in turn identify particular regions and topographical characteristics.

Kleinert's argument oscillates from random textural and colour cues that relate to a wide range of interests such as appear in *Mandala* or *Black Orpheus* to a soliloquy on the red roofs of Sydney in *Red Redden*. Observed perhaps from above, this chequered pattern in red hues also suggests the probable progenitor of the actual material of the work: a would-have-been heritage colonial, mid-eighteenth century, vernacular cream and red weatherboard cottage.

We think we know corrugated iron until we see it in these assemblages where it manifests every hue, pattern and subtlety imaginable, giving the marks of age and experience, that in the construction environment would suggest wear and tear, an elegance and dignity. The iron weathers differently according to the climatic circumstances in which it is exploited resulting in the history of its location being inscribed within it. Kleinert has an 'honesty-to-materials' approach that precludes any superficial interference such as adding pigment. Nevertheless, the finished works appear to be caught in the process of decay according to a lifecycle that is as animate as the leaves, trees, grasses and associated landscape features in which they appear to have

been collected. As much as the iron is highly sophisticated technologically – with great strength inherent in its simple curve – the appeal for Kleinert lies also with what he calls its ‘unpretentious and democratic’ possibilities as a material everyone can respond to, yet in quite poetic terms is also capable of expressing the emotions evoked by a historical account of the passage of time.

The records of their former lives coexist at various levels within the layers of these works while visual, textural tensions come into play as a result of hard and/or soft cuts that may interact. In one light there is the memory of historical Australia and in another contemporary international techniques. Corrugated iron has itself found a new emblematic profile in contemporary architecture; a development that is suggested in Kleinert’s latest work that from a distance suggests cool abstraction but on closer examination reveals another tension: international hard edge that still bears the experiences of the Australian country town tip. Old nationalism in the form of the rural landscape remains but operates in tandem with the transnational, at the same time helping to progress local values and to reach out to the international discourse.

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