

## Vivienne Binns

*Some new, Some old, Some collaborations*

Sutton Gallery

3 – 28 September 2005

Reviewed by Rob McKenzie

Vivienne Binns produced two of the iconic paintings of 1960s Australian art: *Suggon* and *Phallic Monument*.<sup>1</sup> Exhibited at Watters Gallery in 1966, the images pulsed with intense colour. They were painted in an abstract style with hints of surrealism and psychedelia. The works were a strong feminist statement with depictions of female genitalia and their intensity came from the insistence of a female subjectivity, which was a groundbreaking concept at that time.

An exhibition of Binns' recent paintings and collaborations has just been on show at Sutton Gallery and the works date from roughly the last two years. Without explicitly saying so, this exhibition suggested a gap of forty years between two important bodies of work. What occurred in those intervening years? It seems that Australian art history has failed to account for Binns' career. The records aren't entirely blank, but they are thin: an article by Joan Kerr in *Art and Australia*, written in 1993; brief entries in anthologies of Australian art.<sup>2</sup> Yet the greater context remains unknown, the documentation of Binns' endeavours is far from equivalent to

the mass of objects and ideas produced. Her performances craft (including the 'funky ashtrays'), community art and more recently her paintings and drawings are sustained musing on the idea of difference. This notion of difference, being key in the theories of Poststructuralism between the 70s and 90s, were adopted by Binns and made manifest in her paintings.

The recent show was titled *Some new, Some old, Some collaborations*. The collaborative works were made with Geoff Newton and Derek O'Connor. Newton studied under Binns at Canberra School of Art and in the last couple of years moved to Melbourne, where he has exhibited extensively in artist-run spaces as well as setting up the informal artist-run initiative Dudespace. Derek O'Connor is a more senior artist who lives in Canberra and exhibits with commercial galleries in Sydney and Melbourne. Both Newton and O'Connor are known for lyrically abstract paintings that are freeform and enthusiastic.

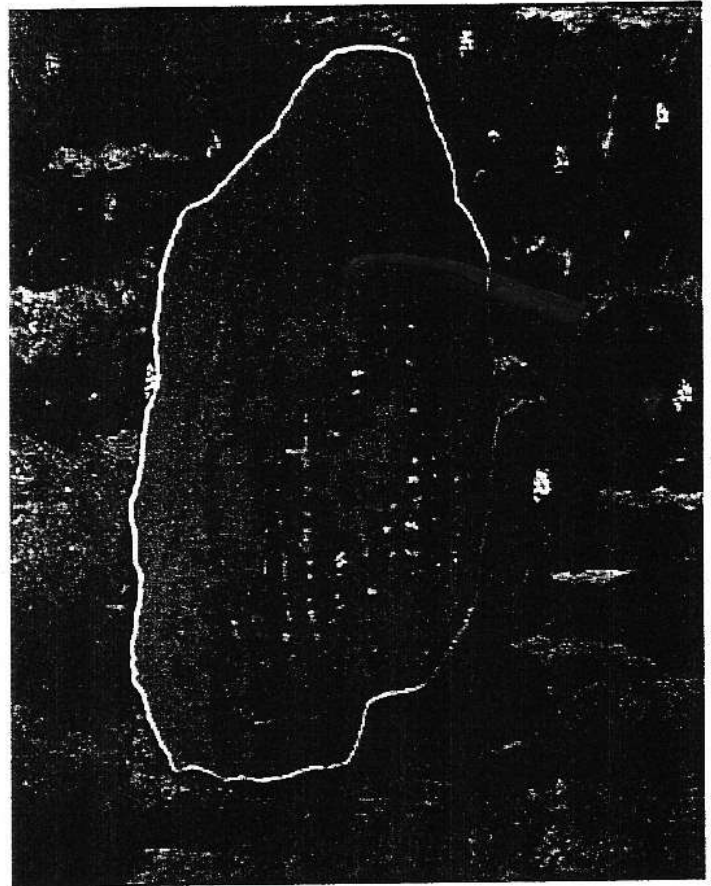
In *Some new, Some old, Some collaborations* all but one of the collaborative paintings took the form of a split canvas. Divided in the middle, one side was given to Binns and the other to Newton or O'Connor. Importantly, both artists painted on the one canvas, so that different styles of art making were placed side by side. This made apparent the notion of difference. More than just an important condition of art and art production, difference is proposed by Binns to be a core tenet of everyday life and a fundamental philosophical position. These collaborative works acknowledge that artists work from different perspectives and produce contrasting images, and that the paintings try to come to an understanding of this reality. Rather than the unifying impulse of a classic modernist practice, Binns' work takes into account the irregularities of living and being – there is no illusion of a stable, singular core. Read in a wider context, these collaborative works can be seen as an experiment in reconciling difference without trying to homogenise it. Difference is an allowable condition, a working methodology that can be productive.

The rest of the exhibition was made up of Binns' solo paintings. A number of the works were from the series *In memory of the unknown artist*. This series has been shown in many exhibitions over a number of years and involved a process of homage and acknowledgement to the artistic practices of anonymous designers and producers. In an artist statement, Binns commented that: "I think of art as a human activity rather than something that only artists do."<sup>3</sup> This is a generous attitude because it is a process of valuing rarely considered aspects of creativity. The paintings from *In memory of the unknown artist* propose that everyday surfaces – the patterns and designs that have been made by someone, somewhere – all have meaning. The process of re-presenting the found designs is a labour that makes the viewer reassess the value of so-called common, anonymous design.

Alongside the *Unknown artist* paintings were works from a newer, less resolute series. These works featured termite mounds and Captain Cook's sailing ship. They were strange paintings that hinted at Australian history and issues of colonisation, though it was difficult to grasp what these paintings were saying about their subjects. Nonetheless, the unfamiliar quality that these paintings possessed showed that Binns has continued to cover new ground. This series is evidence of continued research, with the introduction of new motifs and techniques of painting, bringing other subject matter into Binns' wide range of artistic sources.

A survey of Binns' work currently scheduled for 2006 by the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery will provide an opportunity to reflect on her contribution to Australian art. The notion of difference seems to be as urgent as ever and Binns' paintings are a vital addition to the discussion it provokes. At a time when difference is such an obvious factor in the violence of contemporary politics, perhaps Binns' humble investigations into how diversity can co-exist provides a softer approach than the one evinced by war and terrorism.

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**Above:** Vivienne Binns  
*In Aura of Captain Cook and Termite Mound*, 2003  
Acrylic and natural pigment (GLD) on canvas  
165 x 130cm  
Courtesy of the artist and Sutton Gallery, Melbourne

**Across:** Vivienne Binns/Geoff Newton  
*Chinoiserie*, 2003-5  
Acrylic and lino on canvas  
60 x 60cm  
Courtesy of the artist and Sutton Gallery, Melbourne

<notes>

<sup>1</sup> These works are in the collection of the National Gallery of Australia and are often reproduced

<sup>2</sup> Joan Kerr, 'The Art of Vivienne Binns', *Art and Australia*, vol.30 no.3, Autumn 1993; and Charles Green, *Peripheral Visions: Contemporary Australian Art 1970-1994*, Craftsman House, Sydney 1994.

<sup>3</sup> Artist statement, Sutton Gallery, September 2006.