

Life is a flow: John Bartlett

A conversation with John Bartlett is a roller coaster ride of esoteric notions and down-to-earth statements. In moments he can swing from esoteric discussion of Eastern belief systems such as the I Ching Hexagrams, Zen Buddhism and the notion of Wabi and Sabi through to the sheer materiality of painting, all the while littering his discourse with such terms as “no bullshit” and “fair dinkum.”

Indeed, in many ways Bartlett is both Wabi and Sabi. These terms form one of the underpinnings of Eastern thought. Wabi refers to a non-dependence upon material possessions and has its base in the notion of the self-imposed isolation of the hermit. While he can be a highly voluble partner at lunch, Bartlett spends much of his time alone in the studio.

But while the contemplative Wabi Bartlett may lock the doors of the studio, the Sabi Bartlett makes works of extraordinary rigour and materiality. Sabi is the outward, concrete expression of the spiritual principles of Zen. Thus John Bartlett has attained a rare balance of wabi-sabi and the aesthetic results of this shimmer on the wall; despite being made of hefty materials and based on aluminium, the works seem to float, cloud-like, seducing the viewer in a mist of contemplation.

It was not always this way. Like all solid artists, Bartlett has evolved over time and through various stylistic incarnations and technical conundrums. Indeed, in 1990 he was curated into the exhibition Art With Text alongside such ‘loud’ artists as Linda Marinon, Gareth Sansom and Jenny Watson in a show that revealed the postmodern penchant for utilising text in painting, a thought that is nigh impossible when looking at his current works. Bartlett has in the past utilised Rank Xerox technology and discarded circuit-boards and been inspired by video games, Hip Hop and Break Dancing. But such popular-culture references seem to be an eon ago. From 1991 through to 2002 his work featured impressions of sky reflections on water, then impressions of the desert landscape of Central Australia, incorporating found objects such as leaves, pods, twigs, earth and sand from around Alice Springs. As with the hermit, Bartlett has had to travel far to find peace in his painting.

That is not to say that he has left the real world behind. Odd as it may seem when contemplating these essentially organic paintings a key component to their creation is computerization. In 2004 he began utilising computer technology to explore the potentials of the spiral, the oval and two and three-dimensional building blocks. The structure of the spiral is fundamental, he says. Trees, shells, stellar formations. But it is also a rigorously tight structure and one that will tend to overtly dominate any space it is transcribed onto. So Bartlett, never afraid of experimentation, drew a spiral on the computer and allowed it to ‘evolve’ via programming. While tinkering with cutting-edge technology he was also investigating somewhat more arcane methods of thinking about painting, most especially that of the I Ching Hexagrams.

The I Ching is an ancient system of symbols designed to identify order in what seem like chance, even chaotic, events. The I Ching combines philosophy, cosmology, poetics and mathematics. “The Buddhists call it the Middle Way,” says Bartlett. “It allows a sense of discipline and balance.”

The I Ching can also be disconcertingly arcane. In a triptych executed in encaustic on aluminium Bartlett ‘illustrated’ elements of I Ching readings. At the centre of the triptych the judgment reads:

*“Decrease combined with sincerity
Brings about supreme good fortune, without blame
One may be persevering in this
It furthers one to undertake something
How is this to be carried out?
One may use small bowls for the sacrifice.”*

Bartlett’s solution to this was to further something he had already begun exploring; Minimalism. “They’re so simple that ideally you wouldn’t paint any imagery at all,” he says.

This also raised a key concern that Bartlett had been mulling over for some time; the treachery of imagery, the seduction of the viewer by the obvious and the literal. The answer, Bartlett believes, is to essentially “paint nothing, to give the viewer the freedom to think about the things they should be thinking about, to take them away from the humdrum of everyday existence.”

But Bartlett admits that this raises the central conundrum of visual art. Notions of the ‘sublime’ have been ascribed to a vast array of art-making and Bartlett himself is a fan of the New Zealand spiritualist painter Colin McCahon, the radical paint-flinger Jackson Pollock, the indigenous genius Rover Thomas and the maverick Australian Ian Fairweather, none of whom could be described as minimal.

But painting, he says, is not a strict science. “The result rarely equals the intention,” he says. “The minute you start working it goes in its own direction, the thing’s got a bloody mind of its own, sometimes you are in control... sometimes the painting is. You almost pray that accidents will happen.”

“You have to listen to what the painting is telling you,” he says, admitting that such a statement sounds distinctly “Zen.”

Bartlett has learnt the wisdom not to battle this natural progression. Largely self-taught, after three lessons in painting in Canberra he was unceremoniously told to “piss off.” He moved to Melbourne and in 1986 had found a home at the renowned Pinacotheca Gallery alongside such artists as Robert Hunter and Peter Booth. Since that time he has had 15 successful solo shows with such prestigious galleries as Ray Hughes in Sydney and Dianne Tanzer and Scott Livesey in Melbourne. In his formative years he traveled widely, wandering through the Mediterranean, Africa and Europe, soaking up the various cultures. He also explored various technical approaches witnessed on his travels, which has led to the strong sense of materiality in his work.

Bartlett’s materials include virgin bees wax mixed with varnish and raw pigment, which he often imports from America. The materials are heavy, a problem solved by discovering the use of light-weight aluminium as a base. Whilst he is decidedly pragmatic when it comes to materials, his approach remains more maverick.

“A move into Wabi-Sabi means all the rules change,” he says. Where a Western viewpoint would all too often demand the Golden Ratio – a mathematical constant – in its aesthetics, Bartlett is going the other way, closer to the Chinese notion that in reality “nothing is ever really balanced.”

“Life is a flow...”

Ashley Crawford, Art writer for The Age