

Opening remarks by Dr Victor Majzner for *Bill (Chaim) Meyer*, Exhibition at Castlemaine Historical Museum and Gallery, Victoria, Australia, November 2, 2014.

TARILTA PORTFOLIO – NURTURING THE PLACE

It is my honour to say a few words about this exhibition and as the artist Bill (Chaim) Myer is somehow connected to it, a few words about him as well.

The first impression as one walks into this exhibition is of strong, bright colours, exploding shapes and swirls of sophisticated patterns. The visual poetry of the shapes and their arrangements are reminiscent of dramatic, eerie musical vibrations. Shards of photographs melt and distort into unfamiliar patterns in a high drama where graffiti squiggles meet high art, all tempered by digitally manipulated processes.

But in this exhibition what you see at first glance is only the very surface of what you get. Jewish tradition teaches that there are 4 levels of reality or of meaning: the literal/surface, plain level, the colloquial level, the underlying level and the hidden or secret level. This exhibition straddles all these levels of meaning.

Bill is a religious man, an Orthodox Jew and everything he does is guided by his faith and practice. He is Australian, he is a global citizen and he is a bit of a bushy. His clothes may make him look as if he has just stepped out of a film, set sometime in the 19th century in Eastern Poland, but when it comes to his art he employs the most current technologies. He is a painter, printmaker, he writes poetry he creates installations and makes music. He has a rather wicked, dry sense of humour and laughs readily. He loves equally the company of artists as well as ‘normal’ people – so as you can see he is a complex man *and his artwork reflects all of that*.

After graduating from Melbourne University and the National Art School (now Victorian College for the Arts) Bill like so many artists, writers or performers in Australia in the 60’s and early 70’s was drawn to England and London in particular which was the magnet of cultural pinnacle at the time. There Bill completed his art training in London, and it was in the ‘swinging London’, the time of Carnaby St fashions, the Beatles, Rolling Stones, Monty Python, social and sexual revolutions, birth of feminism, Hippie free love and Mod conservatism, Vietnam War protests, Psychedelic and Op art, experimentations with acid and cheap pot, a time when everyone was still smoking and beer was the artists preferred brew, that Bill came of age.

Artistically, this was a truly revolutionary period. Photography, film, performance, music, graphic and industrial design, fine art, all was being blended, intermixed and cross pollinized. At the time printmaking appeared as the most accommodating process which allowed all of these supposedly separate disciplines to come together. So printmaking became Bill’s major art form.

Bill immersed himself in most of what London offered and could have been swallowed by the alluring, hedonistic life style of the times if not for another very important influence on his life and development – his re-kindled Jewishness. The 70’s was a period of Jewish renewal. The post Holocaust generation of Jews was re-discovering its religious roots. Charismatic young rabbis, some with guitar in hand were teaching with a refreshingly open approach to biblical texts and a very appealing, joyous celebration of Judaism. New translations of ancient Hebrew texts were being made available in English of the golden age of Jewish mysticism from Spain and Israel and most importantly a renewed interest in the depth of Jewish ritual in daily observance became freely available to anyone interested. Bill’s passion for Jewish learning was ignited and provided the balance

he needed to keep him grounded. Through Jewish study and learning, he came to appreciate the purpose of creation and *his* place in it.

This religious view of reality has become a major theme in Bill's art since his London days.

The thirst for Jewish learning led Bill to evolve a research and travel ritual between Jewish centres in Germany, Belgium, Holland, England and Israel which he continues until today. As soon as the weather warms up in Australia – around October/November, Bill is off on his annual pilgrimage overseas for a few months at a time. I'm sure he has his plane ticket already.

His constant travel, moving from place to place, this sense of perpetual nomadic impulse is punctuated for Bill by what he calls his *special places* - his emotional and spiritual resting places; be it the complex of artist's studios in Mishkenot Sha'ananim in Jerusalem where Bill had a studio for many years in the 80's and 90's, or the libraries at Yale University or New York Y.I.V.O, the Vilna Institute where he continued his research into Judaism. But most of all it's his studio retreat in the bush in the Holcombe Forest, outside of Gilford that he established over 30 years ago where he found time to meditate, slow down and recharge his creative batteries. This consummate wanderer has finally found a place to rest. He called this place in Hebrew *Etzim B'Shalom* – The Trees of Peace. His personal paradise, as reflected in works like *Home Amongst the Very Private Trees* or *Path to Paradise*.

The bush as sanctuary and a place for spiritual growth and renewal is one of the underlying themes of this exhibition. Perhaps it's the harsh reality of cities that he wonders amongst every year and which he so emotionally expressed in his poem titled *Windows and Gateways* of 2006:

*“And there is razor edged weeping or acid cutting wire
And the streets are shmutzed with virulent graffiti words
On crumbling walls and broken gates protecting*

Worthless dreaming and detrital histories” that make him appreciate the awesome beauty and peacefulness of the bush? Perhaps it's the wisdom of age? Or the realisation of one's mortality or indeed the toll of ill health that Bill has encountered over the past few years that makes him appreciate the medicinal and regenerative power of the bush?

To Bill, the bush is both nurturer and in need of nurturing. As he has written *“It was this landscape, this habitat which has nurtured and transformed me and which in my stumbling way I've tried to protect, preserve and heal its wounds suffered from mining and timber cutting...”* But he is also a realist, writing about his bush paradise *“It can be a terrifying place, quite ferocious”*. *“It has not all been fun and games and even Paradise has its hidden temptations; snakes and poisonous things, activities one should not do, limitations.”*

His obsession with the bush is not some 'greenie', feel-good thing for Bill, in my view it's his sense of why we are here. Judaism teaches that we are here in order to perform acts of completion, of elevating the mundane onto a more spiritual level of understanding and experience. Creation is incomplete and requires us to fulfil its potential. The world is not ours to mistreat, we are mere temporary custodians of it and must protect it from abuse. We humans have a very important task to perform while on this earth and it's this that I think motivates Bill's ideas. His bush Paradise is a metaphor for the wider world.

In a piece titled *Silence* from 2004, he has written: *“From the same linguistic root come the Hebrew words Shalom = peace and Shleimus = complete or whole, perfectly formed. Thus the peacefulness we may feel in the silence (of the bush) is connected to the wholeness and integrity of the place...”* Hebrew is a language that describes the essence of things – every letter of its alphabet has spiritual

connotations. Only through Hebrew can we come to appreciate the fact that *peace* and *wholeness/ completion* are interdependent.

As you would have noticed most of the works in this exhibition have a central image = a sphere, an egg type shape. In a sense this is his birthing metaphor. The fragile symbol for life that is so central to Bill's physical and emotional experience. It's the centre, the essence of things. Its outline is the border of safety from intruders. Sometimes it appears like an eye or a spy camera, convex, reflecting or looking out at the world of reality as in works like *Forest House from Egg Emerging* or *Dignity of Subtle Ground Coverings* and sometimes concave, reflecting an inner world, a more contemplative one as in works like *Vibrato of Midnight Trees* or *Shomayim Over Lower Waters*. In fact this work *Shomayim over Lower Waters*, amongst many others here makes very interesting use of fractal structures which is the hidden mathematical and structural code of nature, our universe itself. The egg is also a metaphor for the globe. From the micro to the macro, in symbolic terms there are no distinctions.

At times the egg form is complete, at others fractured. At times, when the egg is penetrated one can detect a slightly more sexual reference. At times it is partially open, allowing things to enter or leave. At other times it becomes a more violent, expelling force. The play of inside/outside both in the egg shape and in the imagery of his house and the bush or man imposed geometry and the geometry of nature are other metaphoric themes/ideas that this exhibition is about.

Bill is an avid surveyor of: images, thoughts, sounds and words. These are all fragments from his observations, from emotional connections, from religious sources, from travel, from his safe places, notes from his poetic imagination etc. All of them form histories of his thoughts, memories and experiences.

Like printmaking before, so digital technology in more recent times enabled him to make sense of all these disparate, seemingly unconnected bits of reality and unify them into an integrated oneness that Judaism perceives as God's intention. Everything has a purpose, everything is essential – if only we could understand the underlying plan and our purpose in being here. Bill found the key to this Godly plan in Jewish ritual which governs every aspect of his life, in Biblical texts and in Kabbalah – the mystical essence of reality and God's template of creation. Together with his sense of Australianness and he is a very as you say dinky di Ozzie, these are the motivators underpinning this exhibition.

Biblical texts/ideas are other influencing factors as can be seen in works like *Sky and Earth Building a Place* and *Yaacov's Stones and Building Heim*. Only a couple of weeks ago we started reading the Torah from the beginning again – it's a yearly ritual that Judaism has maintained for over 2000 years. While reading the first few lines of Genesis, "*In the beginning of Gods creating the heavens and the earth...with darkness and chaotic desolation upon the the deep, the Divine Presence hovered upon the waters. And God said, "Let there be light" and there was light*" I couldn't get some of Bill's images out of my mind. This enigmatic description made me think of works like *Shards from my Broken Worlds* or *The Nurtured Egg of Paradise in Tarilta*, of order being formed out of chaos, of meaning being derived out of confusion.

Bill's Hebrew name is Chaim - like in L'chaim = to life! Like his name suggests - LIFE - is the subject and content of these psychological and spiritual, inner landscapes that we see around us here. These are in a sense Bill's moral responsibility as a human being and as an artist to celebrate and affirm the fragility and the beauty of life.

Congratulations. Mazal Tov.

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