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FRONT: PAUL HAY *The Highest Thing in This Room is a Ducks Eye* (detail) 2011

ABOVE: PAUL HAY *Artists Studio* 2011

INSIDE: DEBRA PORCH *Mt. Ararat* 2010

BACK: DEBRA PORCH *Untitled* 2010



PAUL HAY BOX OF TRICKS DEBRA PORCH REGARDS TO THE FAMILY

Friday 27th May - Saturday 2nd July 2011
Canberra Contemporary Art Space, Gorman House



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MOUNT MAJURA
VINEYARD



PAUL HAY - *BOX OF TRICKS*

It seems almost unfortunate that Paul Hay's sculptures must eventually leave his studio. This is not to say they should never be seen in public or they are unsuitable for a gallery, but rather, they reflect an energetic studio practice. In the nursery each work exists in relation to its siblings as well as to the tools of its making and an encompassing conceptual gestalt. Here, the eccentric objects of Hay's imagination materialise from the vices, clamps, a gas cylinder, plastic bottles of toxic chemicals and the very benches upon which they where forged. The studio is a habitat, where everything fits and nothing, however odd, seems out of place. As one idea blends with another there are moments when individual works do not appear to have been separated. The curator who enters into this zone of cohesion with a view to making sense of the studio's inspired chaos is immediately cursed. Hay's work will not be easily evicted and will resist transportation.

At this point one begins to understand that a certain sentiment or rapport has begun to develop in relation to objects that on the one hand defy desire while arousing the viewer's sympathy on the other. There is an element in Hay's work that is invested with emotion through which the audience's consideration is elicited. This begins with modest seemingly uncomplicated materials that might be found or seen anywhere. Hay has the uncanny ability to pair the disparate in ways that suggest each component was made specifically for another. The classical *Unprepared* (2010) for example is a grand piano stripped of varnish, its legs cut off at an angle causing it to slide into the floor. Attacked; the lid is pierced by a hail of arrows evoking the incongruent genres of Western, and (soap) Opera in a way that inspires simultaneous amusement and sadness. The arrow is a recurring motif in Hay's work as seen again in *Measure Once, Cut Twice* (2011) a bunch of caged walnuts pierced by a gigantic steel arrow. The arrow is a potent symbol of love and aggression.

As one struggles through Hay's studio, stepping over a wheelbarrow with flight aspirations, avoiding a bent spike emerging from a fagot of sticks with red painted tips seemingly in dialogue with the red topped ladder from which grows a strange prickly copper protrusion – the barriers between found and made objects begin to dissolve. Hay makes objects that look as if they have been found and finds objects that appear to have been made by him. As he brings these together with objects that we know have been either made or found, a curious body emerges.

Perhaps more like Dr Frankenstein than any sculptor/artist I have known, each of Hay's sculptures animate the inanimate. One feels the overwhelming sense of personal investment with which each piece is imbued and how this references humanity of the author.

The studio is a laboratory where a genetic experiment takes place and piece-by-piece a coherent yet challenging mutant form emerges that is both obvious and surprising. In the gallery Hay's sculptures are released from their original studio context, and like Mary Shelley's chimeric monster their paths are unpredictable. Such is the nature of experimental art and hence the sense of heightened anticipation as Hay opens his Box of Tricks.

David Broker, May 2011

DEBRA PORCH - *REGARDS TO THE FAMILY*

Debra Porch uses installation as a powerful catalyst to explore the visible and unseen ties that connect the past to the present. Her work draws attention to the way memory transforms the ordinary, emphasising the singular and exceptional in the everyday. 'Regards to the family' begins from this premise, using specific objects and images as conduits for memory and the visual mechanisms of installation to re-orientate our sense of the familiar. The work refers directly to Porch's Armenian heritage and to the way the work's title communicates wider bonds with the filial appearing in and out of our memories.

Porch grew up in the Armenian Diaspora — the dispersion of people following the 1915–18 genocide by the Ottoman Turks — and, like many of her generation, with limited connections to history and place. No one in her family had returned to Armenia and its traumatic history encouraged a collective silence. 'Regards to the family' is in part a response to Porch returning to Armenia for a residency in 2010 and to the way these experiences made present a fusing of the self with memories recovered, retold and reinvented. Photographs from the residency in Yerevan are arranged as a panorama in the grooves of an oversized table. They document scenes from one of the world's oldest living cities in a contemporary time, a mix of the sacred and the profane, all cut to remove the sky. They communicate the past to the present, referring to what has happened and what is now occurring in the Armenian capital. They assert, like all photographs, the sense that 'I was here', 'I saw this' and might also be read as a visual salutation to the family that never left or returned to Armenia.

For contemporary Armenians, Mount Ararat plays an important role in defining Armenian nationalism and irredentism, referring to the annexation of its territories by Turkey and as a symbol of its resistance. A painting (of unknown origin) hanging upside down features a scene curiously similar to the vistas of Mount Ararat seen in the photographs. By re-orientating its placements, Porch emphasises the mountain's spectral significance reflected in the water of a lake. The interplay of memory and identity embedded in place is also alluded to in objects that appear suspended in time: basalt rocks coated in beeswax appear like frozen

relics drawn from the building materials of ancient Armenia and an oversized gold necklace divides the space, holding a single heart pendant at its centre. In these exaggerations of scale, perspective and placement, the individual is given a poignant connection to memory and time.

The echoing of private experience is seen in 8mm home movies from Porch's childhood in 1960s Waukegan. Shot by a 15-year-old cousin, it documents three generations of Porch's extended Armenian family gathering to celebrate in the family home. The young cameraman's efforts appear futile – while he moves quickly to capture these 'important' family shots, the interaction is reduced to haphazard glimpses. Throughout the footage we hear the sounds of a small music box being wound by the artist to play the melody of 'La Vie En Rose', Édith Piaf's ode to the romantic impulse that in its English derivation is described as "The magic spell you cast." Perhaps our memories of family, of where we come from and our desires to remember are not too dissimilar; fleeting as it may be, Porch's work uncovers the magical potential of memory, recalled now in the present.

José Da Silva, May 2011

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