

Geelong Gallery
Clean Kill
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Susan Wald's Paintings
By Christopher Heathcote

The ultimate reward for working as an art critic is not material. It involves encouraging promising newcomers to excel, with helping unknown yet deserving artists gain recognition, and, especially, with spotting fresh talent. In the early 1990s, when I held the senior critic's chair at the Age newspaper, I slipped into a group show by recent graduates and was confronted by several paintings that showed genuine promise. Some months later the artist who had made those works, Susan Wald, held a solo show at the same Richmond Gallery - and it was, in my estimation, one of the best exhibitions on the Melbourne art scene that year. The paintings were neither welcoming nor pleasant. Wald had worked up a suite of compositions that depicted a nude figure lying awkwardly at the base of a flight of rickety stairs. This may not sound distressing, but much was conveyed in the way they were composed and skillfully finished. The figure looked like it had been flung down the stairs, and you came away with the overwhelming impression that these sad, pitifully lonely paintings were visual metaphors for all victims of wickedness in the contemporary world, symbols for those who suffer in silence. Even the paintwork appeared distressed. Wald having used brushes, knives and scrapers in a manner that suggested agitation and misery. This was the real thing: authentically expressive art, indeed it was easily approaching the rank of work I had seen overseas by major contemporary artists (Leon Golub, for instance). I was bowled over, so much that I later bought one.

Time passed, life took me in a different direction, and my gallery visits eased off. However, several weeks ago the curator of the Geelong Gallery, Brian Hubber, showed me photographs of Susan Wald's most recent paintings. They represent cattle carcasses in a slaughterhouse and seem even more brutally frank than her earlier works: to be sure, these unsettling paintings are memento mori, that is, they are reminders of our mortality. Of course, Wald continues to hone paintings that are 'tough' and thoroughly accomplished in a technical sense. The artist's pigment is eloquently worked in such a way that the very paintskin seems abused; colour is understated and limited to a narrow, rather sickly palette; and the artist makes able use of geometry in each canvas, the carcasses dangling from a line of dragged paint being exceptionally well composed. Everything is co-ordinated to drive home the bleakness of the subject-matter.

As for their overarching theme, Wald's work now appears Existentialist : a blunt encounter with death without any suggestion of there being more to it, of a hoped-for

afterlife. And yet, something about these paintings, the way they view the immanence of suffering and death, strongly bring to mind religious art. These are images to meditate over during Passover or Lent or Ramandan, paintings that beg we consider not just our own mortality, but that of others, and, perhaps through that, the uncaring ways of our amoral and hedonistic world. Lacking comfort and reassurance, these dangling carcasses mentally cut very close to the bone, which is why some viewers will surely find them upsetting. Looking at them closely is like witnessing a bloody flagellation.

Very clearly Susan Wald's evolving oeuvre is at odds with our increasingly materialist society. She does not bend to the demands it places upon artists to deliver work that is pretty, superficial and undemanding. The artist refuses to be a decorator. Instead she directly confronts some plain, if unpalatable facts about the human condition. Not prettiness, but truth.