**Smoking guns**

SHONA WILSON REVIEW SMH

PLASTISCENIC- FUTURE REMAINS 2012

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**John McDonald**

Scattergun approach … Jun Chen takes a sightseer's view.

Artwork of the week, on a trip around the commercial venues, was Michael Callaghan's *AK47 - Weapon of Choice* at the Damien Minton Gallery. A three-metre-high machinegun, made from 17 layers of candy-coloured plywood, this monument to murder leant nonchalantly against a wall in an exhibition called *Merchants of Death*. This was a tribute show to Callaghan, best known for his work with Redback Graphix, who died in May this year, at the age of 59, after a long illness.

Having been overseas when he died, I feel a bit remiss to have taken six months to give Michael Callaghan his due, but it was exhilarating to see this final artwork realised to his specifications. In one memorable image, it summed up the qualities of a life's work, presenting a political statement with dry, coruscating wit. It suggested one might be able to buy a popular machinegun in a range of fashionable colours, like a handbag or an iPad cover.

Callaghan's politics were firmly to the left, but he was no mere ideologue. A typical piece, be it a poster or a three-dimensional construction, was intended to stop viewers in their tracks. One was drawn to reflect on the deeper meaning of a work, even while laughing at its audacity.

*AK47* is a museum piece, and it's to be hoped a public gallery will show an interest in the work. When so much trendy junk is acquired for public collections, it would be criminal to see the last major creation by an important artist go unnoticed.

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By the time you read this, Damien Minton will be hosting another politically charged group show, commemorating the 20th anniversary of Paul Keating's Redfern Park speech, which will be read out by Gail Mabo, daughter of Eddie, between 4-6pm on Saturday. This is not only a salutary reminder of the meaning of the Mabo case, but also harks back to an era when a politician rose to the occasion at a historically significant moment. There was hardly a memorable speech during the entire Howard era, and today's leaders allow the opinion polls to dictate their every statement. It may be a famous curse to live in "interesting times", but it is just as baneful to live in uninteresting times.

Elsewhere this week I was acquainted with a development proposal that threatens to plant a gigantic mixed-use complex next door to the Watters Gallery in East Sydney. Watters, this city's oldest surviving commercial gallery, will be completely overshadowed by the new building, and parking will become even more difficult. Despite all the talk about treating the city as a series of villages, it seems the council is happy to welcome another large apartment block that will alter the look and character of the neighbourhood.

Money has always called the shots in Sydney, but not much of it is filtering into the art market. Unlike in the big cities of Europe and the US, buying art has never become a natural activity here for high-income earners who buy paintings the way we lesser mortals might buy a book.

In Australia, aside from a few notable collectors, purchasing a work of art is more akin to buying a car.

Some artists have taken this analogy seriously. At the top end of the market, Jeffrey Smart is reported to have said: "If they can buy a new Mercedes every year, they can buy one of my paintings."

These days it costs a lot for a Smart painting. The crucial difference is that a painting by a reputable artist rises in value over time while cars depreciate rapidly.

It's interesting to watch the kind of strategies being employed by dealers during these lean times. Some, such as Damien Minton, are undertaking more adventurous projects, while others are filling shows with small pictures that have a good chance of selling. The Eva Breuer Gallery, for instance, has just concluded a show of small and Picasso-influenced paintings by Victor Rubin that was filled with those ''little gems'' many seasoned buyers find irresistible.

The Hughes Gallery has big plans for next year, but coming into Christmas it is holding a solid show of medium-size paintings by Jun Chen on a slightly touristic theme. Chen's subject is Sydney, and he has approached his task with the enthusiasm of a sightseer determined to capture everything with a camera. The remarkable aspect of this project is the speed and confidence with which Chen has translated these snapshots into oil paintings.

There are six watercolours and 48 oils in the show, and Chen has applied the paint in almost sculptural fashion. He takes the standard locations, such as Bondi Beach, the Fish Markets, The Rocks and Chinatown, and creates a strange drama through the manipulation of texture. As we have seen with artists such as Nicholas Harding and British masters such as Leon Kossoff and Frank Auerbach, it requires skill and perseverance to paint in this manner. Pictures may be completed with amazing speed, but many false starts will be scraped off and end on the studio floor.

Chen is not as neurotic as Kossoff or Auerbach when it comes to reworking a painting. He has a formidable work ethic and a streak of pragmatism that is characteristically Chinese. He is not a romantic searching for the perfect painting but a labourer in the quarry of art, happy to produce works of a certain style and quality. His facility is astonishing, and this show has a consistency many artists might envy.

There are a few moments when Chen rises above the constraints of his technique to capture an effect of light, a pose or a detail that makes one pause in admiration. Yet there are also dead areas in some of these pictures that might have benefited from a more fastidious revision.

One imagines the subject is of secondary importance to an artist who has demonstrated over the years that he can turn his hand to almost any genre, whether it be landscape, portraiture, the nude or still life.

Sydney is a convenient theme, but these vigorous pictures never attempt to get beneath the skin of the place. Chen works exclusively with appearances, taking on the play of surface effects, bending and twisting them to his own ends.

John Walker, showing at the Tim Olsen Gallery, is not to be confused with John R. Walker, who recently had an impressive show of landscape paintings at Utopia Art. This John Walker is an Englishman who was formerly the head of the Victorian College of Arts in Melbourne, and now lives and works in Boston.

His journeyman habits mean Walker has friends and colleagues all over the world, and many of his peers have welcomed this return to exhibiting in Australia. He has included six large oils in this show and more than 20 small pictures, many of them painted on old bingo cards. There is a rude energy in the large paintings, which are gestural abstractions with hints of landscape. Bright bands of red, yellow and blue have been laid over these landscape traces, as if an artist associated with De Stijl had tried to translate the original image into a geometric shorthand.

It doesn't quite work, but neither does it bomb. Walker's work has always been filled with allusions to other painters, but the resemblances are rarely spelt out. In paintings such as *Red, Yellow & Blue Coastal X*, we are never allowed to settle, either visually or intellectually. Some would argue these paintings aren't ''resolved'', but I'd say that is a reason to like them.

Finally, at the King Street Gallery on William, Shona Wilson has an ambitious exhibition titled 2012 Plastiscenic - Future Remains, which sounds like an album by a German progressive rock band. The conceit is a futuristic scenario in which organic and synthetic forms have crossbred into a series of imaginary forms. Wilson presents the display as an archaeological exhibit, filled with cellular structures made from old strips of discarded plastic; with plants and branches moulded from coloured plastic and combined with real seeds, twigs and stems.

Everything has been crafted with Wilson's habitual skill and concern for detail. The difference this time is that she has got away from the boxes in which she previously placed her delicate constructions, and is now creating works that stand like trees in the centre of the gallery, or seem to grow out of the wall. Yet there are still many smaller pieces displayed under bell jars, and a set of modestly scaled prints.

One gets the feeling Wilson is producing souvenirs rather than sculptures.

Yet this impression is part of the fiction behind this show, which presents memories of vanished life forms in a world where the distinction between natural and unnatural has disappeared.

**johnmcdonald.net.au**

**JUN CHEN: SYDNEY**

Hughes Gallery, until December 22

**JOHN WALKER**

Tim Olsen Gallery, until December 16

**SHONA WILSON: 2012 PLASTICENIC - FUTURE REMAINS**

King Street Gallery on William, until December 22