

KINDLE AND SWAG: THE SAMSTAG EFFECT

Kristian Burford, Nicholas Folland, Timothy Horn, Deborah Paauwe, Nike Savvas, Megan Walch, Anne Wallace
Curator Ross Wolfe

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JENA WOODBURN

The Anne and Gordon Samstag International Visual Arts Scholarships are granted each year to a number of Australian artists, enabling them to live and study overseas. To be granted 'a Samstag' marks out the recipient as a 'serious' artist of serious potential; of, if not cutting-edge then thoroughly contemporary cachet combined with a certain theoretical substance. The list of past recipients includes many recognisable names now [or still – since the awards may be given to already established artists provided they are graduates 'of not more than five years' standing [hence someone like Mikala Dwyer's eligibility for the 2005 award] of currency in both the Australian and international art arenas.

Since 1992 the stipends have been distributed to just under one hundred artists. *Kindle and Swag: The Samstag Effect* is a showcase for the work of these recipients, although featuring just seven artists hardly a comprehensive one. Director of the scholarship program and exhibition curator Ross Wolfe explains this, stating that rather than aiming for a complete or definitive catalogue of past 'Samstagers' [which would potentially be extraordinarily impressive] the exhibition is instead curated 'with an eye to a future, recurrent model' – that is, leaving enough artists from whom to compile future shows.

Who then was chosen to illustrate this "Samstag Effect" is intriguing. Included artists range from the well known and lauded – Nicholas Folland, Kristian Burford, current 'IT' girl Deborah Paauwe – to those whose more modest profiles have been established in the commercial realm, such as painters Megan Walch and Anne Wallace. This mixture of artists, in terms of critical, commercial and popular success, seems commendable given that the show could easily have become merely an exercise in PR, a showcase of Samstag's most 'famous' graduates.

That said, as a PR activity the exhibition would not be entirely successful. *Kindle and Swag* is oddly incoherent, the collection of exhibited works seeming less eclectic than

arbitrary. This might be expected, given that the overarching criterion was only that the participants be past Samstag recipients and thus a range of not-necessarily-complementary concerns and approaches, as well as media, are apparent. The usual practical constraints also operated: issues of time and availability, issues of space, whether the loan of works could be negotiated. Nonetheless, it is within this lack of cohesion that many of *Kindle and Swag's* works falter. The inherent weaknesses of each artist are laid bare – Megan Walch's insipid *Surf Drops* flounder in the shadow of Timothy Horn's hulking, ceiling strung *Discomedusae* sculpture, while the strikingly coloured paintings of Anne Wallace diminish the gentle vitality of Nike Savvas' adjacent *Waterfall* works. In these, delicate imagery is traced out using small foil dots, and it is already in the nature of this metallic media, set on a white painted background, that the image may become almost invisible when viewed from a certain angle or in a particular light. A further distraction operates in the form of *Zero to Infinity's* [also by Savvas] gaggle of glass storks clustered around the paintings' base. While Savvas' interest in the translation between two and three-dimensional languages of representation is theoretically sound, the manifestation is often, as here, too stretched to speak to the matter with any resonance or veracity.

Similarly, Anne Wallace is represented by four disappointing works, which are further undermined by the disparity in their size and frame, according to their separate provenance. The works are typically Wallace, whether the threatening exterior environments of *Murder* and *Lonely Road*, or the set-like interiors of *Writer's Block* and *Sang-froid*. Each scene seems carefully staged in order to provoke questions regarding the depicted characters and events: *Sang-froid's* femme fatale coolly eyeing the gun in her gloved hand, *Lonely Road's* trucker standing roadside, waving down an approaching vehicle. Yet for all the potential mystery, the flat paintwork and lack of careful finish to details, which would more clearly etch out the scenes makes the works appear lifeless. They lack the frisson that should be present in such subject matter. Even the heightened colours of *Sang-froid's* interior – emerald green, gold, scarlet and crimson – promise a verve and passion that is curiously absent. Similarly, Megan Walch's paintings also lack underlying substance. Her *Extreme Ikebana series* are surface focused dalliances with the modeling of gloopy shapes, like some juvenile experimentation with op/abstract/fantasy art.

Amongst such works, Timothy Horn's massive *Discomedusae* is entrancing. Based on a nineteenth century etching of a jellyfish, the pendulous rubber sculpture is composed of a multitude of noded flaps and folds. Within the draped membranes glows a core of light that imbues the strange creature with life. Deborah Paauwe's large scale photographs are also commanding. *To Remember, Tender Trap* and *Hide and Seek* each feature the customary faceless girls in intimate poses, all clasped hands and hair and exquisite dresses. Perhaps it is the placement of the figures in gloom, rather than earlier series' candy-coloured backgrounds, as well as their not being surrounded by a host of similar works [as would be the case in a solo show] that gives the photographs a taste of underlying darkness, rather than the more usual sense that the gauzy prettiness doesn't disguise much substance at all. Kristian Burford too makes an interesting extension of his previous works *Katherine...* and *...Christopher...* Originally installations in the form of three-dimensional tableaux, each work featured a life-sized human sculpture in some intimate setting, naked or almost naked, recumbent, absorbed. Burford has now made photographs from the same scenes, taken from various viewpoints, as well as stereoscopic images. They are a fitting extension of a work that was to do with being privy to privacy, adding another, even more voyeuristic level to the work.

Both Burford and Paauwe's works are well chosen as representatives of their current practices. By contrast, Nicholas Folland is known for better work than the *Untitled* –

lifeboat series by which he is represented here. In the work a small wooden boat, like a toy or model ship is set upon a low plinth with an inbuilt light that glows beneath the boat's keel. It is a colourless reinterpretation of an interminable symbol. In terms of Folland's practice it is much weaker than previous works, visually both less dramatic and less refined than the exquisite works of the *Nameless Fear* exhibition [Contemporary Art Centre of SA, 2003], less resonant than his Greenaway exhibition in 2002, in which various ill-fated exploratory expeditions were the inspiration for a strong and poetic series of sculptures. Folland is clearly so good at the sweepingly elegant, sizeable statement. Perhaps for those familiar with his practice the miniature ship may stand as a symbol or emblem for his more grandiose works, but *Untitled* remains less a lifeboat than a craft reduced to mantelpiece-ship-in-a-bottle insignificance.

It is next to the technicianship of Folland or Paauwe – whose work has always exhibited good production values, whatever one may think of their imagery – that the thin skills of painters such as Anne Wallace and Megan Walch become apparent. And this is the problem with *Kindle and Swag's* offering, the basis of its pervading unevenness. There's no denying the opportunities the scholarships deliver, yet when Wolfe states that "Samstag scholars are swag men and women"¹, speaking of each artist's desire and ability to pack up their 'swag' and go anywhere in a spirit of adventure and curiosity, the description seems too generous. That each artist can, will and has done this is of course the case in one respect, given that the scholarship is specifically provided for artists to live and study overseas. However, it fails to resonate in a more crucial sense, ascribing to both the participants and the exhibition a wide-ranging vision that is ultimately lacking.

Note

¹ Ross Wolfe, *Kindle & Swag: The Samstag Effect* [catalogue], Adelaide: University of SA Art Museum: 10

Nicholas Folland: *Untitled – lifeboat series*, 2004
Photo courtesy the artist and Greenaway Gallery, Adelaide

