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(By John McDonald. NB. www.johnmcdonald.net.au)

Robert Malherbe

Rhys Lee

Peter Godwin

Guan Wei

There is a romantic expectation that an artist will keep producing works that are wholly original. This can create a debilitating pressure, as some feel obliged to produce a new twist with every exhibition. But art is not created in a vacuum, and all artists take something from their predecessors. As Picasso is famously alleged to have said: "Good artists borrow, great artists steal." In other words, the superior artist feels no need to disguise his or her influences. Take it on, use it, abuse it, and come through the other side.

This is the case with Robert Malherbe, whose new show at the Tim Olsen Gallery is the result of a two months stay in Paris where he studied the works of modern masters in the museums. Those influences are visible throughout this exhibition, with Soutine and Matisse being especially prominent. They are present in the rubbery way Malherbe paints an arm, or the use of brilliant contrasts of red, black and white. Even his subject matter owes a debt to the Parisians. The show is called *Genre*, and most of the works fit easily within the categories of still life, portraiture, nude, or landscape.

Contemporary art has sacrificed the idea of genre for more complex concerns, but there is still an infinite amount that may be done with the most basic subjects. As if to demonstrate this point, Malherbe has conjured a virtuoso performance in the small painting *Still life on Bookshelf* – a single yellow flower in a glass of water, sitting on an orange-coloured shelf. That's all there is, but from this, Malherbe has produced an amazingly intricate composition, animated by many small details.

There are at least four separate tones in the shadow cast by the saucer on which the glass sits. There are five shades of blue in the water. The yellow of the flower is picked up in four other parts of the canvas. The pale pink background has been added last, allowing it to envelope the motif, flattening out the picture plane. I could go on, but this provides a rough idea of the way the artist has thought his way through this unprepossessing subject.

In *Standing Nude*, he paints a model adopting the most banal possible pose: upright, arms at the side, as if for a medical examination. But what's the brown patch that cuts across her right arm? Is it part of a bra cup? The flesh is painted in the most sensuous tones of pink, finished off with a reddish outline, but the pale green background is no less vigorously painted. A dark line that runs down the right-hand side of the canvas provides a perfect counterweight for this deceptively simple composition.

There's not a lot to say about what these works 'mean', as all the interest lies in the way they are painted. Time and again, Malherbe comes up with an unexpected touch that changes the way we look at a composition. In *Christina Flats XII*, for instance, it is a red line that 'corrects' the contour of a thigh; but between the thigh and the line, the background colour is still visible.

Malherbe's nudes are also portraits, filled with a sense of the sitter's personality. His still lifes are superior exercises in decoration, in the way that Matisse or Bonnard spoke of this quality, as a difficult and highly desirable goal to which modern artists aspired. The landscapes are the least interesting parts of the show, although any one of them would stand out in a group exhibition. The nudes and still lifes have such an abundant sense of personality that Malherbe's expressive, sun-filled outdoors scenes, feel slightly anonymous and repetitive.

Nevertheless, nothing can diminish the feeling of excitement that radiates from these paintings. This is the show of an artist who is obviously enjoying himself, discovering something with almost every canvas. It's the show of a painter who has finally shed the 'emerging' label and is entering his maturity.

I wish Margaret Olley were around to see the Malherbe show as it would have given her a lot of satisfaction. She might not have been so taken with the paintings of Rhys Lee in Olsen's larger ground floor gallery, which are self-consciously spooky and mysterious. There are many distant echoes in these pictures, from Edvard Munch to Philip Guston, via the German Expressionists. They manage to convey a sense of psychic unease in colour schemes that are simultaneously dull and acidic.

Although Lee's compositions are claustrophobic, he has a very clear sense of what to leave vague or unfinished. The large painting called *Yes* features a set of pointy-headed silhouettes that might be Guston's Klansmen, trees or flames. There are cartoon elements, and areas of saturated colour applied in a deliberately cack-handed manner. Another large painting, *Sweet Heart Rodeo*, is nothing more than an androgynous figure on a horse, against a murky, blue-green landscape. It's more like a *Carnival of Souls* than any rodeo one might imagine.

There is a hint of melodrama about Lee's work, and some might find his pictures opaque and pretentious. Yet they are also seductive in a peculiar way, demanding the viewer's sustained attention, not proffering any easy revelations. Call these paintings 'Gothic' or 'Symbolist', but they are the works of an unusually fertile imagination that could not be more distant from the time-honoured preoccupations of Australian art. Lee's work may be a take-it-or-leave-it proposition, but it can't be easily dismissed. One of the great virtues of the maverick artist is that he or she lets us know when conventions have grown stale, and when our own tastes have become predictable.

If Robert Malherbe is hitting his straps as a painter of still life subjects, Peter Godwin has attained a mastery in this area. Over the past decade, Godwin has established himself as one of Australia's most accomplished - and still underrated - painters. He has a Morandi-like ability to keep discovering new worlds in the corner of his studio, through painting and repainting the same motifs. Godwin's new exhibition at Defiance Gallery II in William Street, Paddington, is another breathtaking performance. The show consists of works on paper, many of them in an oval format that recalls the Cubist period of Braque and Picasso.

When one looks closely at these pictures, a thin pencil line is visible inside the mount, as if Godwin wanted to make it absolutely clear that the format is a deliberate choice, not a way of concealing an indecisive bit of painting. It doesn't require much looking to realise there is not an indecisive line or dab of paint in these works. Although the brushwork appears to be loose and spontaneous, Godwin has thought out each composition as a play of diagonals and horizontals, from the black-and-white lozenge shapes of the floor tiles to the upright forms of easels, windows and tribal masks.

Artists of all eras have made small, very free sketches in this manner, and there is a timelessness to these works, which recalls Fragonard, no less than Braque.

After the painterliness of Malherbe and Godwin, and the lugubrious atmospherics of Rhys Lee, it is a jolting experience to walk into Guan Wei's new exhibition, *Play on the Beach*, at Martin Browne Contemporary. Guan Wei has always been a cerebral painter, devoted to clear, graphic forms arranged into a series of visual puzzles. Nowadays, he spends most of his time back in his hometown, Beijing, but maintains a presence in his adopted country.

Play on the Beach finds Guan Wei pondering the great Australian fascination with sand and surf – qualities not associated with Beijing, where a glimpse of blue sky is cause for celebration. After having two studios closed down by the Chinese authorities, Guan Wei has begun to see Australia as a haven of peace and tranquility. In the catalogue, he even compares it to the Pure Land of Mahayana Buddhism.

Being intellectually restless and terminally playful, Guan Wei can't quite bring himself to see the beach as the domain of enlightened beings. His clouds might come directly from robes and decorations on the Forbidden City, while the animals that share the beach with his generic humanoids, seem to be chosen for satirical purposes. There are not too many vultures to be found on local beaches, let alone ostriches or chameleons. It's not that Guan Wei is opposed to Australian hedonism, but even after twenty years' acquaintance with this country, he still suspects it's too good to be true.

(1,416 words)

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Robert Malherbe: Genre
Rhys Lee: New Paintings
Tim Olsen Gallery, until 30 October.

Peter Godwin
Defiance Paddington, until 5 November.

Guan Wei: Play on the Beach,
Martin Browne Contemporary, until 6 November.

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