

ROOM 1

Part of the point is to use sculpture as a stick to beat painting with.

Tony Clark's interest in art developed in the 1970s, at a time when art institutions favoured paintings that emphasised their own flat surfaces. He regards his development of a style of 'relief painting' as a way to reclaim the illusionistic space that the previous generation had rejected.

In this gallery Clark's *Jasperware (Landscape)* 1993 is accompanied by a collection of recent sculptures, made by Melbourne artist Joanne Ritson. These works are connected across several decades by the same point of origin—speculative 'ideas for sculptures' from Clark's sketchbooks dating back to the 1980s.

The curvilinear, abstracted drawings in Clark's notebooks suggest landscape features, figures, vases and the biomorphic shapes of Modernist sculpture. They have been shaded to suggest volume, and call to mind the shallow relief sculpture of architectural friezes, the moulded portraits of cameo jewellery, and the distinctive white bas-relief designs on Wedgwood Jasperware porcelain, all important reference points for the artist.

In the 1990s Clark used these sketches as the basis for his *Jasperware* paintings, characterised by flawlessly flat surfaces interrupted by illusionistic shading that encourages the perception of gently raised sculptural relief. More recently, Joanne Ritson has treated the sketches as actual studies for sculptures, realising Clark's propositions in three-dimensions.

Ritson was asked to imagine the missing information from the side and rear planes of Clark's sketches, and to choose the scale, colour, texture and materials of the sculptures. Ritson has explained that her choice of materials comes from, "my love of wax anatomies and the history of preserving likenesses in wax and plaster, chosen because they appear fragile, alive and human."

These new works take Clark's thinking about pictorial illusion, spatiality and the relationship between painting and sculpture, present from the earliest beginnings of his practice, into new territory.

ROOM 2

It's this idea of finding something that can, in principle, be applied over and over again. That's always been the way that I've worked, to never embark on a painting project that can't be replicated ad infinitum . . . the multiplicity is absolutely part of the meaning.

From the outset of his painting practice in the early 1980s, Tony Clark has repeated themes and visual tropes in ongoing bodies of work that he develops and expands upon over time. Many of these series span decades, and some evolve into offshoots that become distinct series in their own right.

This room features several series that relate to the exhibition's theme of the sculptural, and also to the artist's enduring interest in dissolving traditional hierarchies of value across genres such as landscape and portraiture, and disciplines such as fine art, decorative art and design.

The lessons Clark has learned from the seriality of pop art and the Duchampian idea of the readymade can be seen here in his repetition and appropriation of imagery, drawn from his extensive knowledge of the histories of art and design.

For example, the human forms in his blue and pink *Prix de Rome* paintings are quotations from the ancient Roman 'Portland vase' and Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel. His baby-faced *putti* are references to the cherubs that decorate friezes, frescoes and sarcophagi in Classical art, and his floral paintings are lifted from the millefleur backgrounds of medieval tapestries. The stark grisaille *Designs for Portrait Jewels* simultaneously propose the idea of the intimate private mourning jewel and architectural decoration.

In this room there are a handful of formative paintings that were springboards for new bodies of work. Clark's first step towards the representation of shallow relief in his *Jasperware* series can be seen in his image of Mao Zedong from 1988. Also present is the earliest example of Clark's *Chinoiserie* series, in which he translates this ethereal 18th century European style into something much more solid and sombre. His first commissioned portrait painting, a likeness of the poet Peter Porter, opened the way for an ongoing series of portraits in the style of cameo brooches and funerary sculpture.

At the entrance to the gallery an imagined death bed portrait of the musician Rowland S. Howard is 'decorated' with an ensemble of birds, flowers and putti to form a hypothetical tomb design and homage to Clark's former student.

ROOM 3

Since the outset of his artistic practice Tony Clark has engaged with the idea of architecture, both through the subject matter of his paintings and their physical format and mode of display.

His first exhibition of paintings, *Technical Manifesto of Town Planning* (1982), consisted of a collection of small panels depicting historic buildings from Australia and elsewhere as a proposal for an 'ideal city'. Their rough technique exemplifies Clark's ambivalent, ad hoc but also serious approach to cultural issues. The panels are arranged along a strip of wooden moulding that wraps around the corner of the gallery to suggest an integration into the built environment. Displayed in this way, the paintings are caught in an endless loop, shifting from work of art to architectural feature and back again.

A sense of the artwork folding in upon itself is also present in Clark's *Pilaster Paintings*, in which the more usual canvas support is eschewed in favour of upright wooden boards, which mimic through their form the architectural columns painted upon their surfaces.

In a later series, the columnar form is attenuated into a 'stretcher bar'—wooden struts that support the back of stretched canvases—and on these narrow strips Clark has painted strings of coin-like discs. The titles of these works refer to yoga positions, and evoke another collapsing of forms, from architectural to spinal columns.

Ammonite Column 2006 is a painting of a type of column popular in eighteenth century England, featuring capitals with volutes shaped like ammonite fossils. In its first presentation at a museum of natural history, this painting erupted into three-dimensional space through the incorporation of actual fossils (which have been substituted in this exhibition with plaster casts of the originals).

The visual pun in this work evokes the semantic considerations of René Magritte's iconic painting *The Treachery of Images* (*This is not a pipe*) 1929, and brings to the fore the deep questioning about representation at the heart of Tony Clark's practice.

ROOM 4

In this gallery we see the exhibition's only reference to Tony Clark's well-known series of landscape paintings *Sections from Clark's Myriorama*. Based upon a nineteenth-century parlour game in which cards could be arranged to create an infinite variety of panoramic landscapes, the *Myriorama* paintings recall the seventeenth-century romantic landscape tradition of Claude Poussin and Salvator Rosa.

Clark has also long held an interest in seventeenth-century theatre drawings and etchings and, since his earliest *Myriorama* works in the mid-1980s, has perceived a similarity between his landscape paintings and theatre backdrops. In 2012 he introduced a new painting series titled *Buehnenbild* that makes this association explicit.

In these paintings, which take their title from the German word for scenery (literally 'stage picture'), *Myriorama* landscapes are framed on both sides by painted architectural pillars, lending the illusion that the landscape is a backdrop on a stage. The impression of the painting as theatrical scenery is enhanced in some works by the addition of a draped curtain.

Since 2013 a collaborative performance project by Tony Clark and Melbourne-based choreographer Shelley Lasica, *Represent*, takes this association one step further. Each performance is situated in a new setting and features an unstretched landscape painting by Clark, which serves as scenery for a performance by Lasica. In the event that a *Represent* backdrop is exhibited post-performance in an art gallery, it undergoes a shift in status from scenery to work of art—a transition that, for Clark, is both dubious and deeply interesting.

The *Buehnenbild* paintings can be viewed in a continuum of works by Clark in which he proposes paintings as models or plans for architecture, jewellery and other creative disciplines. The artist has remarked,

It is cruel to name something with an unkept promise, I know, but I like the titles "Design for a . . .", because of the idea this evokes of a reality deferred—the 'real thing' being yet to come.

In *Unsculpted*, Tony Clark's *Buehnenbild* paintings are accompanied for the first time by a musical overture, commissioned from UK-based composer Kevin Flanagan, which emphasises the theatricality of the paintings and builds a sense of anticipation for a performance about to unfold—another deferring of audience expectations.

See www.buxtoncontemporary.com for information about performances of Shelley Lasica and Tony Clark's *Represent* during this exhibition.