

Artist Commentary
Ken Unsworth

by **Glenn Israel**

b. Melbourne 1931

The Skidderump, 2000

bricks, steel, glass, timber, slide projectors, sound tape, motorised components
1043cms (diam) x 320cms(h)

ARTIST'S STATEMENT

"The artist, and I am thinking about the true artist, by which I think I mean, one whose imprint with the passage of time, is as clear and relevant as it ever was, accommodates insight, wit, magic, humanity, humour, invention and the use of invention in novel, clarifying and unsettling ways consistent with and responsive to the illnesses, the issues and the imperatives of the times. The artist is both shaped by, and shapes the cultural and political landscape that we inhabit"

Ken Unsworth, 1999

"It's the way that it is revealed that is important. My work is concerned with the fundamental areas of human consciousness and behaviour, things of a spiritual nature. Visual art tries to make the invisible, visible"

Ken Unsworth, Art Gallery NSW Bookman Press.

CRITICS' COMMENTS

"His work is often ephemeral, surviving only in the memory of those who once saw it or in rumours of that memory. Like Beuys, whose work Unsworth passionately admires, his art is full of apparent contradictions. He reworks the great sagas of life and death while shaking the staff of a jester... The popularity of the works with a wider audience may be attributed to the richness of aesthetic effects and to the experience of witnessing a psychodrama unfolding. Beauty and delirium fade into melancholia and back into laughter. He is able to make you cry and laugh at the same time. Unsworth has lived and suffered as much as most of us so his art is able to reflect our own deepest fears, joys and secrets."

Anthony Bond "The Phenomenon of Unsworth" *Ken Unsworth*, Art Gallery of NSW, Bookman Schwartz Press, Melbourne, 1998, p. 11

COMMENTARY

Ken Unsworth has an eminent reputation for his striking and mysterious installation work. With *The Skidderrump* Unsworth presents a range of ominous reflections on the nature of European culture and history. Situated in an almost blacked out room, *The Skidderrump* is a large-scale installation that features a conical pile of bricks encircled by railway tracks. From these tracks, motorised trolleys or carts additions move slowly around and around the central form. Creaking as they lurch forward, the carts project two images back onto the rubble. The texture of the bricks lends a ghostly quality to the projected images of a male face and a naked, upside down male body. An extraordinarily beautiful song for soprano from Mahler's Third Symphony plays in the background. The musical accompaniment provides a transcendent counterpoint to the creepy atmosphere of the room. *Skidderrump* is a German word used to describe a cart to carry the dead and dying.

Ken Unsworth began making sculpture when he was working at Bathurst Teachers College in 1966. He has been exhibiting his work since this time. Unsworth achieved considerable notice in 1975 with the use of his own body in a series of performances *5 Secular Settings for Sculpture as Ritual, and as Burial Place*.

The period from 1975-82 saw the artist begin to explore the intricacies of the subject or theme of the journey of life. Much of his work is a nostalgic reflection and expression of his own personal experience. He makes works that evoke emotional response around the recognition of a sense of loss or absence. In many of Unsworth's installations there is a sense of fear and of sombre tragedy. To allow the viewer to understand his world, this mindscape, Unsworth employs the strategy of spectacle and theatre. The separate but hallowed museum location confounds but also compounds the experience of his work. In usually dark and mysterious enclosures, sounds emanate from different locations to add to the air of disquiet.

Unsworth's unique taste makes his work accessible to a broad audience. He likes to set up conversations with the viewer via the artwork. However these sculptures/environments/installations do not offer rational answers, they are suggestive rather than explanatory.

There are several recurring themes and symbols in the work of Ken Unsworth. He is particularly interested in the defiance of gravity or the act of levitation - whether it is his body or river stones hanging just above the ground. The dark rooms he employs also destabilise the consensual understandings of gravity. In *The Skidderump* the ghostly projections hover just above ground level.

Unsworth explores the nineteenth century spirit of Romanticism. This literary artistic and musical style still informs a lot of contemporary art practice. Romanticism emphasises an individual interpretation of the world that employs the recognition of the power of the senses and emotions. The lush music by Mahler in *The Skidderump* is quintessentially romantic. It is important to note that Mahler's music that was banned by the Nazis because the composer was Jewish.

Also, in Unsworth's work the piano has emerged as something of a leitmotif. In earlier works, for example, *Rapture* 1994, a piano has been elevated on long legs with seven keyboards, like steps leading up to it, while the body of the piano is filled with straw. There is the suggestion of decay, of a lost culture, misuse and abandonment. Typically, this melancholy is destabilised with the discovery of plastic mice hidden in the straw.

Humour is another important strategy used by Unsworth. For example, in *Sundry Appearances* 1995, an upright piano has been covered in sticks, as if nature is taking over or strangling a key symbol of nineteenth century culture. In *The Skidderump* the carts produce inexorable squeaking and rattling noises that are both amusing and frightening. The carts are animated by cartoon like gendered armatures that could signify man and woman. Within the recent history of European culture railway carts have another more ugly association than that of mere industrial utility. The carts Unsworth employs could refer to the railway carts used to transport political prisoners, Jews, Gipsies, Slavs and homosexuals to the concentration camps of Nazi Germany.

Unsworth also uses materials such as fire, stones and rope which, in certain configurations have complex ritualistic connotations. In *The Skidderump* the cone of bricks refers to the industrial landscape but could also be said to have almost a druidic spiritual presence. Unsworth often uses materials and objects that still have the energy of the people who once used them and so underlines a strange sense of nostalgia or an interrupted story. Indeed past, present and future existence is amongst his chief concerns. Unsworth likes to imply a mythic resonance in his work. Other Unsworth leitmotifs include stairs, and the broken doll. Toys and repetitive clown like actions often appear in Unsworth's sculpture. Perhaps these objects could symbolise unhappy childhood memories.

The Skidderump brings together all of these concerns - a romantic obsession with history, decay and times passage, an interest with the processes of memory in the recognition of life's journey, and a child like playfulness and joy in presenting riddles of such in an accessible spectacular fashion.

Readings

- Bruce James, "A Different Dreamer", *Sydney Morning Herald* 10 October 1998, p. 14
- *Art + Text* 48, 1994, p. 69
- *Ken Unsworth*, Art Gallery of NSW. Bookman Schwartz Press, Melbourne 1998
- *An Australian Accent*, John Kaldor, Sydney. Art Project 7, Project Studio One. New York, 1984
- *Look*, Art Gallery of NSW, October 1998, Page 14-15