

## Seeing The Net, 3 Recent Works of Stephen Armitstead

by Dr Phillip McNamara

Stephen Armitstead's current exhibition consists of 3 works: *Descendant*, *Man O' War* and *White Wash*. Like much of his oeuvre they incorporate sculpture and the process of time. Each of the 3 foregrounds a particular medium Armitstead has used for their associations in previous works: audio, flour and charcoal. Whilst the works are broadly concerned with the current world context of political posturing, they are equally about intentions and how these may change or are changed over time; through circumstance or environment. Along with politics the works also evoke symbolic associations related to agronomy, biology, physics, psychology, spirituality and sociology (to name just a few).

**Descendant** is comprised of 14 floating (at exhibition opening) white balloons that translate, via single track audio, first speeches by senators of the 45th Australian Parliament. Trapped by the ceiling these vessels, over the 5 days of the exhibition, will gradually descend to (perhaps) find a resting place on the floor. The inflated speeches chatter and bob about, get blown about by the entrances and exits of viewers, then - over the working week of 5 days -deflate and fall. The "speeches" look like anonymous mini heads which babble on and over each other. On day one they are higher than viewers and positioned as god-like. Yet they create a cacophony of words uttered without really any power to be heard. They are a tower of Babel; an indication of the disharmony which arises through inflated expression of mind and desire. A number of questions arise. Are all uttered words to be interpreted as mere noise? Where does the air go? The sounds go? What can one discern from the garble of syllables? Who is hearing? Does the open space holding the balloons aloft ever change?

**Man O' War** consists of *caltop-like* wooden structures pointing charcoaled spears at the roof. Their phallic shape makes them symbols of the passions, desires and lower nature. Spears, as symbols of life energy, can also unify by putting an end to illusion. Here they make a clear counter-point to the floating balloons above; the disembodied voices of Australian Senators. The spears defend their ground and, by repercussion, also partially prevent or make more dangerous the balloon's pathway towards the ground. Here they are ready to slaughter that which descends, so can be taken as either foes or defenders of the Higher Self. Is it irony or pathos when we realize that the balloons will come down and perhaps be crucified on the spears? Yet the spears are now burnt. Organic matter has become hard carbon. Wood, when burnt by fire, becomes charcoal and then ash and, at no point in the process, can it turn back into firewood again. This is the struggle of transformation. Charcoal is fuel, so these works ask us: with any shaking of a literal or metaphorical spear, what do we fuel? Do we throw our spear to feed ourselves, to protect

ourselves, to wound and kill, or to put a necessary end to something? In many societies charcoal is also used to both fuel earth ovens and to make drawings; it is a creative and alchemical medium. Charcoal is also part of the process for making bread from flour; a symbol of nurturing life and a medium Armitstead has also previously used.

The sacrifice of Logos and the emptiness of words are taken up also in **White Wash**. This work consists of an alphabet of skin toned letter stamps, next to a 'whiteboard' made of compressed flour. Flour, whilst in its different guises is literally a basic food source for most of humanity, is also a symbol of spiritual food which comes down from higher planes and "giveth life" (John vi. 33). For Swedenborg "Fine flour is truth derived from good." Here Armitstead asks us to stamp our words - activities of the lower plane and nature - into the fine flour. During the progress of the exhibition these words will be stamped over or collapsed through the activities of others. What will be the constant is the plane of fine flour whose whiteness may also remind us of the perfect purity of original mind and our oneness with each other. In this oneness our mind is not concerned with the changing opinions of the world. This work, in its simplicity, also poetically evokes the same sensibility indicated by Dōgen Zenji's (1200 - 1253): "In a snowfall that covers the winter grass a white heron uses his own whiteness to disappear." Will the resulting imprints be a song of harmonies or a mosaic of lost words?

Look around the 3 works: those bobbing clouds of inflated speeches ... working in tandem with the tree that is now a burnt spear ... with the grain that is now fine flour, and the words we may stamp ... or listen to ... or chatter to ourselves... a series of successive states. And what? As a spear, a spear has its own time. As a balloon, as words, a balloon and words have their own time. As flour, flour has its own time. The action of stamping too. And all this is the world of cause and effect and consequences. Yet we, and our world, are more than the physical properties of forms and materials and actions. We are also words, ideas, and something intangible made of both what we see and something else that holds all this.

In this most recent series of 3 works Armitstead continues his poetic dance with the grand themes of wind-voice, form-chaos, existence-nonexistence, truth-falsehood, delusion-enlightenment, production-destruction, self-others, life-death. These play, through the duration of transmuting time and its operative processes, to show their true nature of being inherently empty magical illusions; always transitory and evanescent. We live and die within the profundity of such a reality. And, as presented by Armitstead, isn't it sad yet humorous, aesthetic yet mysterious, enmeshed yet free?