



Room, Letter, Window, Map

Recent works by Glen Skien

Redland Art Gallery, Cleveland, Gallery 1

22 November 2009 – 17 January 2010

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I first met Glen Skien on a visit to Mackay in Queensland in early 2006. I was attending an artist's books symposium at Artspace Mackay and his studio, Silent Parrot Press (named after a story about pirates in a *Boys Own Journal*), was part of an informal art tour of Mackay. Those in the know were visiting, and I tagged along. But nothing had prepared me for what we found inside his studio doors, fronting Mackay's main Wood Street. There may be a 'find' or two in the second hand shops but generally Mackay's business district feels like your average country town/small city, albeit with amazing natural beauty close by with the Pioneer River and the coastal environment. In contrast, Skien's studio, a stone's throw (and an infinity) from the CBD, was like opening an ordinary box to find an unexpected richness within. A large etching press stood on the floor, the desk alcove stacked with objects old and ambient, new and reworked. Bundles of prints tied with string, collaged artworks delicately constructed, cut out birds peeping out of old boxes, and postcards stacked and arranged, created a trove of visual intrigue. His interests, in ideas of migration, cataloguing experiences through boats, letters, postcards and birds, and repositioning lived experience anew, was compelling.

The studio had a spell-binding ambience, with the works and their aesthetic providing a multi-layered experience. The resemblance of these contemporary objects to illuminated manuscripts of the past, with their ability to gather their own histories regardless of the lives of individuals through whom they have evolved has an echo in Geraldine Brooks' novel, *People of the Book* (Harper Perennial, 2008). In this narrative a medieval manuscript

is recovered, and during its restoration a book conservator traces the stories in the many lives through which this Jewish prayer book has passed and begins to understand its miraculous survival.

Glen Skien's artworks similarly pursue discarded histories. He collects and reuses old objects, remakes them with collage, prints from them, sometimes constructs them into boxes. These may become birds, boats, landscapes, all of which develop new meanings under a nostalgic guise and in so doing reflect on their genesis, journeys, and meaning.

There is nostalgia inherent in the objects he selects as source materials. For Skien, "Nostalgia is an inescapable layer of meaning that is embedded in any materials that have past histories, and one could say that the degree of nostalgia is gauged by how old the materials are. Connected to this is the fact of these objects having been discarded. For me, the use of materials with existing histories leaves an awareness of a connection to the transient nature of all things".¹

Three years later Glen Skien's life has new resonances. He abandoned his Mackay studio to soaring rents driven by the mining boom and moved to Brisbane. The work in this exhibition marks the culmination of three years of study toward his Masters of Visual Arts degree at the Queensland College of Art (QCA), Griffith University. His work has continued to grow in aesthetic strength, using the opportunity of three years of dedicated study to extend and embrace the elements at its core. But when he takes me upstairs to visit his small working area within the QCA post-graduate studios, this utilitarian space is as



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rich in imagery and his unique aesthetic as his earlier one, decked out with objects collected and constructed. I rarely covet things, but the intimacy and potential that these objects offer, their histories remade, spliced with contemporary experience, is spell-binding, and I too am caught in their web.

Skien is a mature age student, and with some decades of a consistent vision already under his belt, was not a likely candidate for a dramatic artistic makeover within the MVA program. However the opportunities offered here have allowed him to sift, work through and otherwise dissect his largely intuitive working methods and structures. Writing toward his MVA Skien is exploring the philosophy of phenomenology, an intuitive process of gaining knowledge and understanding of our everyday experiences through the suspension of all pre-existing empirically (or scientifically) based knowledge of the world.

There are new modes of construction in the work – his umbrella series is a little looser, rougher perhaps than where he was before. These are intended as a collection and comprise some 15 dark umbrella shapes recessed into shallow pale boxes. While each is individually crafted, an artwork in its own right, together they have an unsettling presence, even threatening. Skien describes them as “a kind of existentialist journey where inanimate objects have a sense of containing their own historicity. We ask ourselves, is it we who define the object, or the object that defines us?”²

There is an overlay of Steed from *The Avengers* (the British cult television series made in the 1960s) in the umbrella, an accessory which, surprisingly, Skien had not owned before he came to Brisbane. The exoticism of this object to him personally

is fused with its connotations – black, traditionally shaped, it is a businessman’s tool, a secret agent’s weapon, a raven’s wing, an artist’s transition, a self-portrait.

The boat shape remains, symptomatic of his journey to Europe at age 21 and the rite of passage that came with questioning his connections to Australian cultural bindings. The boat is also a pointer to the Australian indigenous experience, a mode of recontextualising the images of history that, until very recently, comprised a highly Eurocentric view of our history. His work has become more pared back, painterly, increasingly sparse. There is more collage within these works, related to his research and the experience of living in a city. Creatively, for Skien, this may only be expressed through collage.³ Recent work has increasingly seen his production of one-offs from ephemeral materials, with their multiple histories inherent within them. He suggests, “Printmaking is still a significant part of my practice but for now at least collage is my closest connected experience of the every day.”⁴



Layered with imagery, redolent of experience, time, emotion, longing, these works evoke real life and personal histories past and present. The collaged element in *The Europeans*: “you can’t look at yourself in the ocean” sees a man performing athletic handsprings, balances, trajectories, along the boat shape, morphing, bending and flexing through life’s incarnations. The style of drawing suggests da Vinci and there are references to European painting from previous centuries, trompe l’oeil. Below the boat are other journeys – houses at the end of a line, on a stilt, a road, with a series of etchings of North Queensland sunbirds on brown envelopes below (image b.).

Also new are his tobacco tins, collages set in resin in highly evocative containers – old, printed, rusty. He acknowledges the age in these objects, symptomatic of our inability to escape the past. Set under the resin are birds constructed delicately from maps, sewn together with handwritten postcards, postmarked, joined with red thread, the large needle also preserved like a fossil, connections made inextricably to our past and present.

This work rejects the digital masking of much of new media, eschewing reproductive coolness for physicality and intuitive jolts of memory. The phenomenology concept is an apt companion for the Glen Skien journey toward the essential core of our lives, driven and bound by emotional journeys, the vestiges of Europe which resonate, reflections on the Australian indigenous experience, and the embedding in objects of our landscapes, beliefs and substance as hybrids of all we see, hear and feel.

Louise Martin-Chew
25 October 2009

Louise Martin-Chew is a freelance writer based in Brisbane. She contributes to national newspapers, magazines and books. She is coauthor (with Judy Watson) of *Judy Watson: blood language*, The Miegunyah Press, 2009.

1. *The artist to the author (email), 18 October 2009.*
2. *Ibid.*
3. *Ibid.*
4. *Ibid.*

Cover: *"All of the things I could have told you about birds"* 2008, collage, assemblage and resin in tobacco tins.

- a. *The Europeans: "you can't look at yourself in the ocean"* 2008, dry-point etching, collage and postcards.
- b. *The Europeans: Carte Postale (detail)* 2008, dry-point etching, collage and postcards.
- c. *The Europeans: Carte Postale* 2008, dry-point etching, collage and postcards.
- d. *Biography with Spangled Drongoes* 2008, dry-point etching and collage.
- e. *The Europeans – collective histories* 2008, dry-point etching, collage and postcards.
- f. *Diary pages III – IV* 2008, collage and assemblage.
- g. *Diary pages V – VI* 2008, collage and assemblage.

Images courtesy of the artist. © Glen Skien

Redland Art Gallery, Cleveland

Cnr Middle and Bloomfield Streets,
Cleveland Q 4163

Monday to Friday 9am – 4pm
Sunday 9am – 2pm
Closed Thursday 24 December 2009 –
Tuesday 5 January 2010
Admission free

Tel: (07) 3829 8899 or
gallery@redland.qld.gov.au
www.redland.qld.gov.au



Redland Art Gallery is an initiative of Redland City Council,
dedicated to the late Eddie Santagiulliana

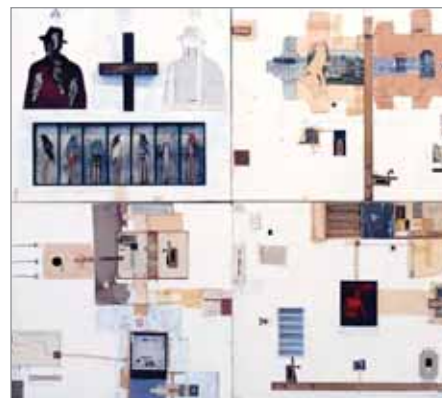
About: *Glen Skien*

Glen Skien was born in Nambour in 1959. As a child, he moved with his family and four older siblings to Mackay. Unable to undertake art education in Mackay, after he left school Skien took on a sign writing apprenticeship at TAFE where his technical skills were honed to a high level. He travelled to Europe in 1981 aged 21 and began to question his cultural connections to Australia. Returning to Australia he completed a Diploma of Fine Arts course at Townsville TAFE (1985–1988), where his teachers were Anneke Silver, Anne Lord, Ron McBurnie and Robert Preston. His first prints were made through the

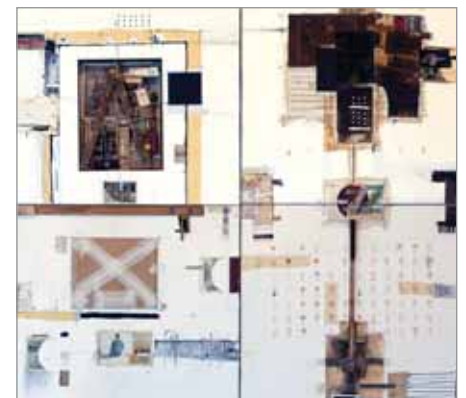
Umbrella Studio in Townsville. He returned to Mackay in 1990 where he worked as a sign writer. He bought an etching press in 1997 and began Silent Parrot Press, supplementing his art income with part time work at Artspace Mackay. He moved to Brisbane in mid 2006 and is currently completing his Masters of Visual Arts at Queensland College of Art, Griffith University. He has exhibited widely throughout Queensland and internationally in Sendai, Japan (2000). Glen Skien's work is included in institutional collections throughout Queensland and private collections all over Australia.



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g.