

**Juan Ford**

**More is Less**



**Unenlightenment 2** (2006) oil on linen, 66 x 51cm

## Juan Ford: More is Less

Juan Ford's work constantly challenges conventional ideas and practices about portraiture. This Melbourne-based artist candidly admits that his paintings are 'not portraits at all in the end, as they represent nothing about the people in them'.<sup>1</sup> For him, the portrait genre is a means of 'creating some wonderful otherness'.<sup>2</sup> The term 'otherness' denotes 'the state of being different; diversity'.<sup>3</sup> It is an apt expression when encountering Ford's work, for his approach to portraiture is disparate and multifarious as well as complex.

In 2001, while completing his postgraduate studies at Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology, Ford was already engaging his audiences in the theatrics of subjectivity and narcissism through an absorbing series of pensive and disquieting portraits. Exquisitely rendered and incorporating anamorphic imagery on engraved aluminium, this body of work poses questions about personal desire and the inner psyche.

Ford's *Clone* series of the following year expresses a spiritual dimension and affords insight into the nature of personal identity and the soul. The unsettling dominance of the doppelgänger<sup>4</sup> is brought in to play in paintings that evoke the uncertainty of a society confronted by changes wrought by biotechnology, especially genetic engineering and the potential for clonal propagation. Loss of identity through human replication and the uncertainty of whether a clone has a soul are issues central to this work.

The artist's ongoing preoccupation with the human psyche is revealed in a group of paintings fittingly titled *Songs from the Penumbra*, produced in 2003. Solitary illuminated figures, seemingly in a hypnotic or cataleptic state, are placed elegantly in nebulous landscapes and invoke divine power as they participate in extemporised, incantatory acts. Like a shadow, these compositions are elusive, ambiguous and detached.

Over the past two years Ford's art has moved from penumbral concerns to focus on the technicalities of painting. Using digitally-manipulated photographs of friends and colleagues as the basis of the work, he created a series of large-scale heads in profile set against a neutral background. In painting them side-on, the artist divests the subjects of personality and emotion. They assume the guise of phrenological studies, where form, light and colour prescribe the character and significance of the work. 'They ... cease to be portraits; they are about painting itself',<sup>5</sup> Ford stated in 2004. He purposely called this series *Abstraction*, partly as a means of extricating the work from the conventional notion of portraiture as representation but also to highlight the increasingly conjectural nature of these paintings. Painting, phrenology (*Abstraction # 8*), a major work from the series, won the '2004 Fletcher Jones Art Prize', an important biennial acquisitive exhibition organised by the Geelong Gallery.

'Solo', an exhibition shown at Dianne Tanzer Gallery, Melbourne in 2005, extended Ford's preoccupation with the formal and structural possibilities of painting. It included several large, hyper-realist heads and a new body of work based on 1950s photographs of atomic bomb tests on ocean atolls. Like the portraits, these 'sentimentalised baroque vapours of utter devastation',<sup>6</sup> as the artist described them, also embrace abstraction but in a way that suggests powerful forces at play beneath the visible paint layer. Whereas the heads are composed and dispassionate, the explosion paintings are intense and apocalyptic. They are a dramatic counterpoint to the ambiguity and mysteriousness of the portraits.

**More is Less** is the intriguing title Ford has given to a series of work he has been engaged with over the past six months. A number of the pieces were completed during a three-month Australia Council studio residency in Rome to research the disembodied head in art. They are a personal response to the ancient art and culture of the city, especially to its age-old tradition of portrait sculpture. The artist was drawn especially to the ghost-like and ethereal qualities of the broken marble busts from the times of the Roman republic and empire. Detached from their historical context, these solitary figures aroused great empathy in Ford. He saw them as being 'like discarded shells from the past'.<sup>7</sup> In the resulting paintings, they are presented in a half light against cool, monochromatic backgrounds. Here they transcend their vestigial role and take on a contemporary significance. Exuding pathos, they become symbols of human isolation and urban emptiness.

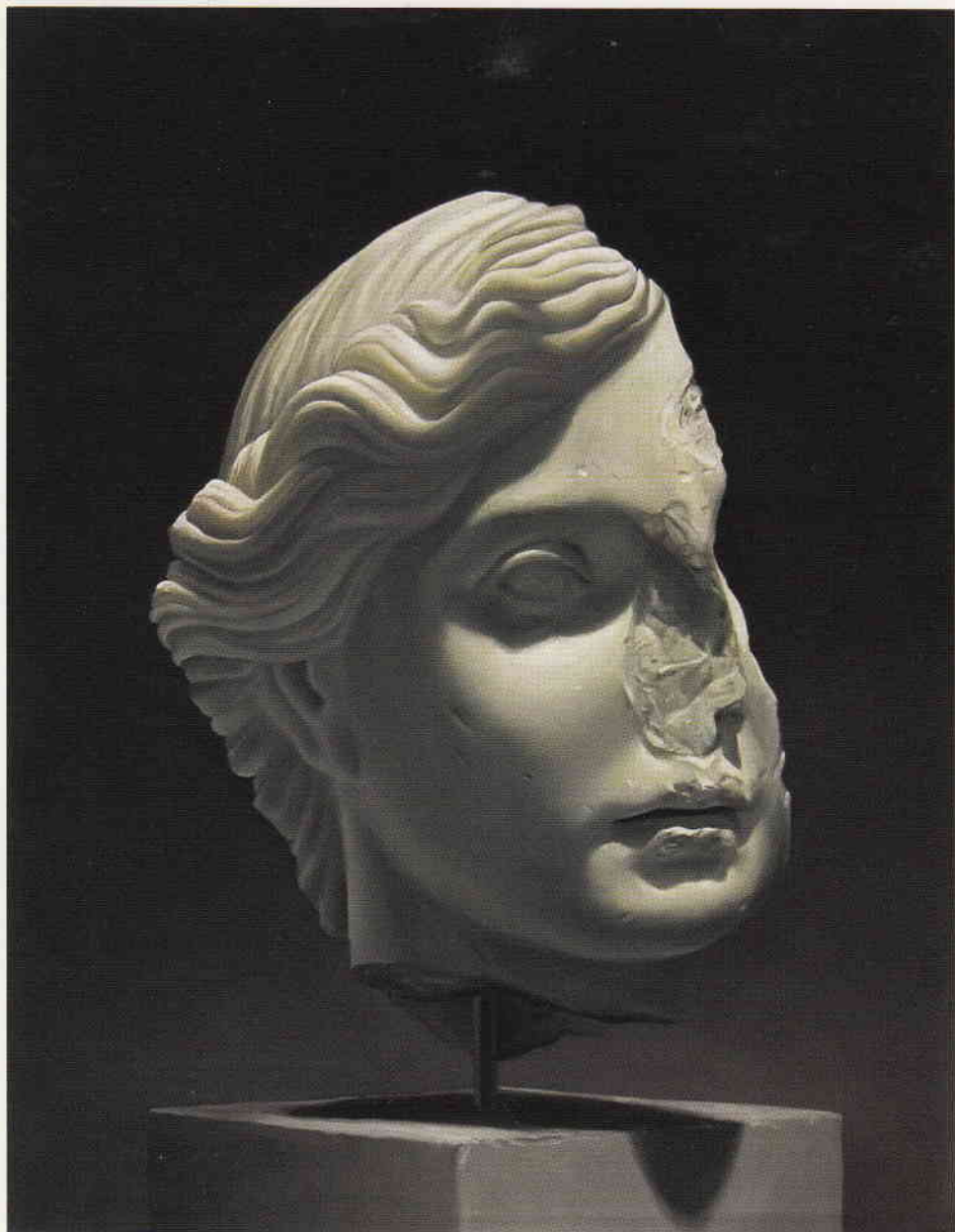
Working from photographic images of the original busts, Ford subtly modified his subjects, augmenting and changing their facial features so they engage directly with the viewer. With its elements of deception and subterfuge, this series of paintings demonstrates the intelligence and ingenuity of Ford's aesthetic, which is enhanced by his exceptional ability as a painter. The works follow on from the artist's earlier group of heads in profile, which also show an Italian influence through the portraiture of the fifteenth-century Renaissance painter Piero della Francesca. Piero's celebrated diptych of the Duke and Duchess of Urbino<sup>8</sup> was particularly significant for Ford. The panels are marked by their simple serenity and clarity which connect with an innate sense of order and simplicity in Ford's paintings.

Two anamorphic pieces *Ignorance* and *Unenlightenment 1*, and the companion work *Unenlightenment 2* make up the installation component of this exhibition. The works are a reaction to the cultural overload which Ford experienced as a result of his fervent engagement with Rome's extraordinarily rich history and artistic heritage. 'It made me feel rather tiny in the scheme of things .... I was also aware of just how profoundly ignorant I am in the face of so much ... history'.<sup>9</sup> Hence, in the cylindrical work *Ignorance*, the artist has depicted himself with a pig's face. Witty and self-effacing, it is a symbol of Ford's seeming inexperience and credulity, and a wily pun on the term 'pig ignorant'.

Although he had learnt a great deal in Rome, Ford came away sensing he had understood less about things generally. The simple adage 'the more I experience, the less I know'<sup>10</sup> is a truism germane to these works. Hence Ford's choice of title for the exhibition **More is Less**.

In *Unenlightenment 1*, where a chandelier is delineated in black adhesive vinyl attached to the wall, the viewer is required to stand under the adjacent halo to see the anamorphic image in correct perspective. Black absorbs rather than emits light and thus reinforces the sense of 'unenlightenment' which Ford felt. This theme is expanded further in *Unenlightenment 2*, a painting of an inverted ornamental light fitting transcribed from a photograph which the artist had shot in the Capitoline.

The most recent works in the exhibition comprise a disparate group of paintings of single light bulbs resting on the ground or suspended from the ceiling. Ford produced these images following his return to Australia in April 2006. They are a home-grown response to his Italian experience. 'These works are about being exposed to such wonder for three months and then returning to quotidian existence back home. They are about what happens when you try to apply the influence of great painting to everyday Australianness'.<sup>11</sup>



**Husk 2** (2006) oil on linen, 21.5 x 28cm

Ford consciously had in mind the thoughts of the pioneering American conceptual artist Sol Lewitt when creating these paintings. He was drawn to a statement from the artist's influential text *Sentences on Conceptual Art*, published in 1969: 'One usually understands the art of the past by applying the convention of the present, thus misunderstanding the art of the past'.<sup>12</sup> In applying this logic to his own work Ford set about producing new paintings in the knowledge that he was intentionally misconstruing his perception of ancient Roman culture.

The light bulb images link thematically and poetically to the chandelier anamorphosis and Capitoline light painting. Meticulously rendered, they are composed entirely of tonal gradations of muted browns except for the glowing filaments, which seem to radiate warmth and energy from the picture surface. In their clarity of detail and luminosity these images become metaphors of the human spirit. As such they relate back to the artist's paintings of the early 2000s examining the nature of identity and the soul. Produced at the end of one journey, the works intrinsically mark the beginning of another. They can be seen as a celebration of Ford's homecoming and also of his creative and intellectual renewal as an artist. Like the portraits, these paintings transcend reality and become complex delineations of human experience.

Connections and disconnections proliferate at every level in Ford's work. Encompassing diverse sources such as art history and personal experience, it comments on the idiosyncrasies of human behaviour and on the human condition generally. His portraits are subjective and subliminal in the same way that the light bulb paintings are intuitive and insightful. Painting, for Ford, is a sensual and immensely gratifying experience. Engaging the mind as well as the eye of the viewer, it is, for him, a means of 'creating some wonderful otherness'!

## Stephen Rainbird

### (Endnotes)

<sup>1</sup> Artist's statement. Juan Ford: *Long Shadows Cast*, catalogue, Arthouse Gallery, Sydney, 24 September – 15 October 2005.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> As defined by *The Australian Concise Oxford Dictionary, Fourth Edition*, Oxford University Press, South Melbourne, 2004.

<sup>4</sup> A *doppelgänger* is an apparition or double of a living person.

<sup>5</sup> Artist's statement. Juan Ford: *Abstraction*, catalogue, Arthouse Gallery, Sydney, 1 – 20 September 2004.

<sup>6</sup> Artist's statement. Juan Ford: *Long Shadows Cast*, catalogue, *op.cit.*

<sup>7</sup> Email dated 31 March 2006 from Juan Ford to the writer.

<sup>8</sup> The diptych of Federico da Montefeltro and his wife Battista Sforza was painted by Piero in 1465-66. It is now in the Uffizi Gallery, Florence.

<sup>9</sup> Email dated 25 May 2006 from Juan Ford to the writer.

<sup>10</sup> Email dated 6 June 2006 from Juan Ford to the writer.

<sup>11</sup> Email dated 25 May 2006, *ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> Sol Lewitt. 'Sentences on Conceptual Art'. *Art Language*, vol.1, no.1, May 1969.

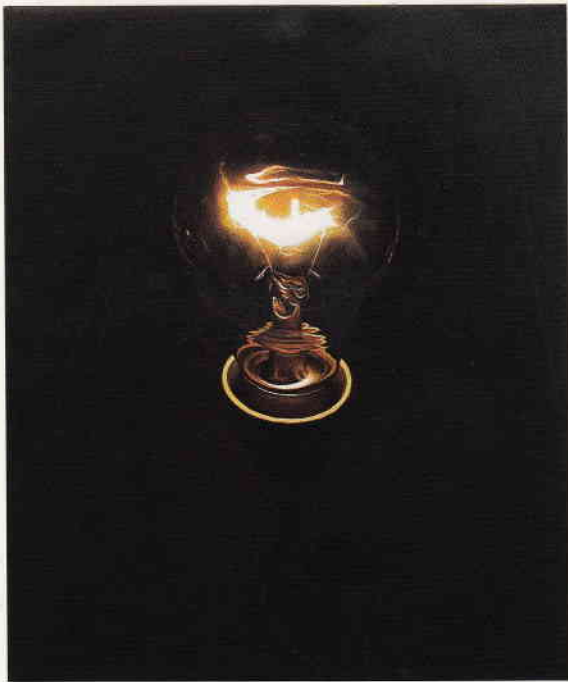


Australian Government





**Ignorance** (2006) oil on linen, relective cylinder, 55(w) x 55(d)cm



**Beacon 2** (2006) oil on linen, 30 x 25cm

jan manton art

59 Melbourne St Sth Brisbane, Qld 4101 +61 7 3844 0043 [www.janmantonart.com](http://www.janmantonart.com)