

# Out of art's boiler room

**Peter Godwin: New paintings**  
Defiance Gallery. Until October 22

**Juan Ford: Long shadows cast**  
Art House Gallery. Until October 15

**Jan King: New sculptures**  
King Street Gallery on Burton. Until October 15

**Greg Johns: New sculptures**  
Australian Art Resources. Until October 14

October was the key month of the Bolshevik Revolution. It provides the title of Eisenstein's famous film and the world's most relentlessly high-brow art journal. But although the art world loves to think of itself as revolutionary, it is a fact that October is the month when the commercial galleries do some of their best business. There are weeks when I pore over *Art Almanac* wondering what will justify a review, but this month I could fill the entire column with a rollcall of significant exhibitions – and this is ultimately a much more painful dilemma. Rather than succumb to the lure of the list, I've chosen four shows – two painters and two sculptors – but I could have selected a dozen alternatives.

Peter Godwin is a painter who demands attention, even in a week of outstanding exhibitions. After a long period when he consigned himself to seclusion and invisibility, Godwin has emerged with a series of solo shows at Defiance Gallery that have sold out almost immediately. The third and current exhibition is no exception. What is most impressive about Godwin's success is that it has been achieved with little publicity and no participation in any museum survey. He has been taken up by private collectors rather than by institutions, and the news of his work has spread by word of mouth.

Over the years, one recognises this as the most reliable guide to artistic quality. The collectors who precede the museums are rarely wrong. This was the case with William Robinson, who was selling paintings to private collectors for huge sums long before the museums reluctantly came to the party. It is a lesson that has been repeated many times over. One thinks of Elizabeth Cummings, Shona Wilson and Cressida Campbell, to name only a few examples. There are plenty of curators



Staying power ... *Large Green Interior* by Peter Godwin, at the Defiance Gallery.

who have demonstrated that it is easier to make the wrong call when you're not using your own money. In institutional ranks there is an apparent preference for those artists who have the most obvious rhetorical hooks and gimmicks, or for those who set out to shock and offend. Collectors, on the contrary, seek works they can live with and enjoy. This is where Godwin comes in, as a painter of subtle, undemonstrative still lifes and interiors that offer up their charms by slow instalments.

Last year, I chose Godwin as the winner of the Mosman Art Prize, and a small excerpt from the judge's report has been reproduced on the brochure for this show. Although there were a number of strong contenders, Godwin's painting had a staying power that seemed to beat off all challengers – and this is exactly the quality one finds in his current exhibition. Godwin uses the unlikely medium of egg tempera on linen, stretched over a backing board. His style is painterly, but each composition has been subject to a vast amount of planning and rearrangement. His colours are dull and thinly applied,

but the lighter shades stand out with luminous force against the darkest of shadows. Perhaps the real pleasure of these paintings comes from a close inspection, which reveals that works such as *Interior with Bird* or *Large Green Interior (Souvenir de Ghent)* are scored with marks and lines that defy photographic reproduction. All the artist's thinking, all his struggles with motif and medium, are laid bare.

It is one of the truisms of art appreciation that the viewer responds with a keener interest to those works where some sustained effort is discernible. It is farcical to think that creativity is not vitally bound up with the artist's capacity for work. Even Whistler, the champion of the expressive blot and dash, was a tireless worker. Inspiration is not a gift from the gods, but a pay-off for those who serve their time in the boiler room of the studio. Godwin comes across as a worker, and so does Juan Ford, the young Melbourne realist who has won a string of prizes in the past year, including the People's Choice in the 2004 Salon des Refusés, for a portrait of Allan Fels.

There is always a place for an artist who can paint a picture with near-photographic precision. This kind of technical ability is an easy crowd-pleaser because so much contemporary work is deliberately de-skilled, ham-fisted and ugly. The challenge for an artist such as Ford is to find an image that transcends the wow factor of mere technique. A successful painting can't rely on form without content.

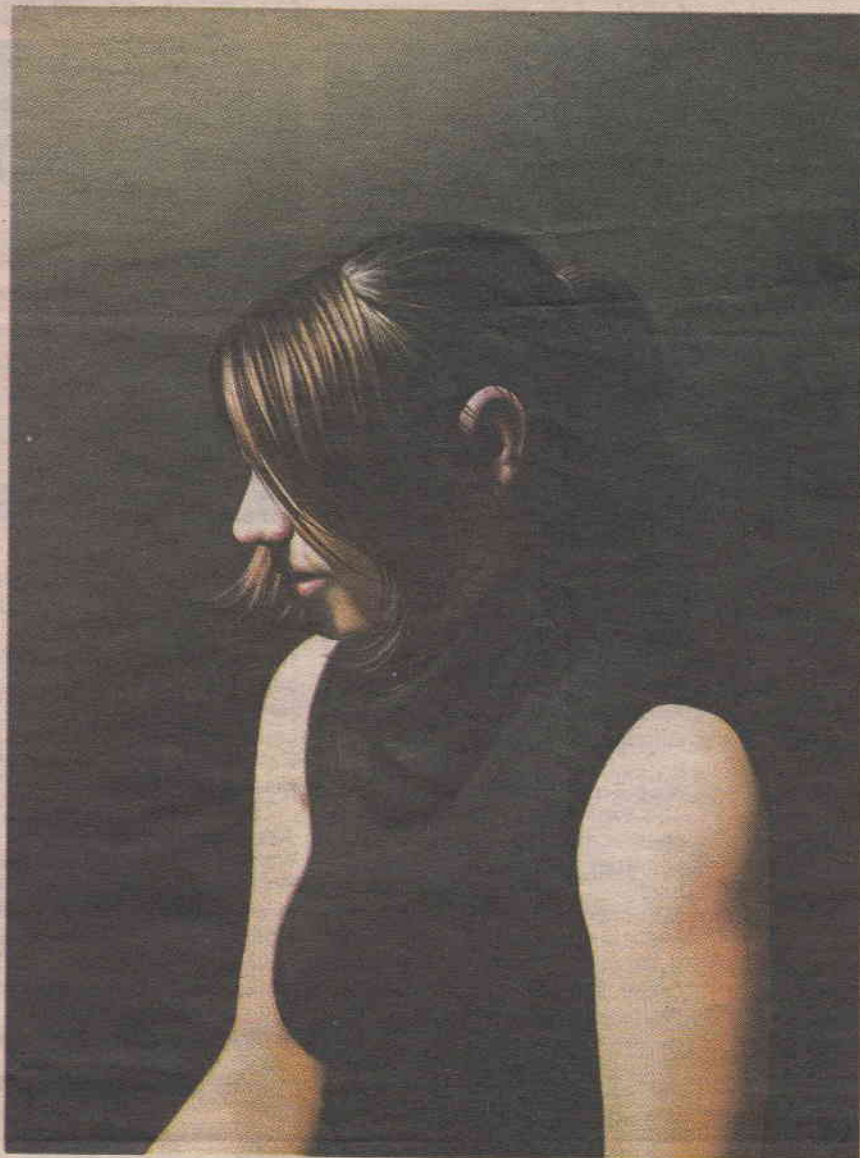
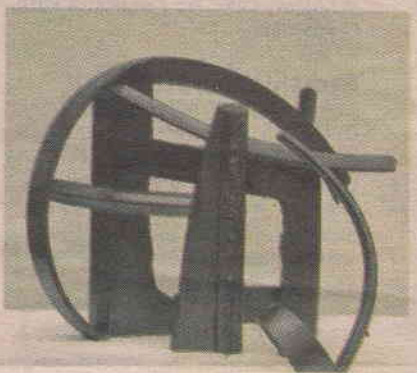
In his exhibition at Art House, Ford has approached this problem from an oblique angle by painting the most exacting pictures of fragments of atomic explosions. He refers to these paintings as *Abstractions*, a title they share with a series of portraits of friends. The only painting with a different title is a portrait of Pat Corrigan – a subject that could never be reduced to an abstraction.

Explosions are a sadly topical theme, and Ford accepts there is a moral danger in aestheticising these forces of devastation. Nevertheless, he has plunged in, searching for a subject that inculcates a form of dangerous beauty. The result is at best a partial success, because these large concoctions of smoke and flame are still too vague to justify the scale on which they are painted. Ford's explosions tend to create a backdrop for his other *Abstractions*, the portraits, which are beautifully observed and painted, with just enough chiaroscuro to lift them out of the realm of sheer likeness and add a hint of drama.

Ford has the ability to be a proficient tradesman, with the ambition to seek out much broader horizons. If his skills are still in advance of his achievements, one feels it is only a matter of time until he gets the balance right.

In the exhibitions by Jan King and Greg Johns, two experienced artists are working in a similar medium, but with contrasting styles: one an assembler, the other a caster. Both take their cue from the natural world, but approach the subject from different angles. The comparison gives the lie, once again, to the lazy but common idea that all metal sculpture is essentially the same thing.

Johns is the more prominent artist, with numerous public sculptures all around the country, and a recent blockbuster commission in Spain. He is also the subject of a handsome book by John Neylon, a rare feat in a country where not many sculptors have been judged worthy



Shape and form ... *Wavering Circle* (top left) by Greg Johns, *Abstraction 15* (right) by Juan Ford and *Out of the Window* (left) by Jan King, who used painted steel for this work.

of a monograph. There is an impressive consistency about Johns's new work at Australian Art Resources, but he has the kind of imagination that approaches an exhibition as if it were a military manoeuvre.

Time and again Johns rings the changes on a series of simple geometric shapes, inspired by the way fractal geometry has found an underlying order in the most diverse natural forms. His cor-ten steel sculptures are immaculate feats of corporate art: they have the singular power of emblems, but manage to retain suggestions of natural and manmade forms. They are, in fact, a form of stripped-down baroque for the machine age, being ornamental forms that enjoy a clear relationship with architecture. The one

work that breaks free is an arrangement of totemic pieces called *Corridor II (The View From Palmer)*, which uses natural materials including jarrah and ironstone. This work relates to an area outside of Adelaide that Johns has begun to transform into a sculpture park. In the process it seems, the landscape has wrought its transformations on him, too.

Jan King is a far more intuitive artist than Johns, and this is not simply a matter of gender. Where Johns seems to want nature to conform to his own, geometric imperatives, King is content to go with the flow. Works such as *September Song* and *Interlude* are lyrical improvisations, with fronds of twisted metal echoing the rhythms of reeds and leaves, or perhaps currents of

air or water. King has experimented with materials such as beaten copper, wood and slate, which provide a sensuous dimension that may be felt by the eye, let alone the hand.

Coming from a generation of sculptors preoccupied with structure, King displays a strangely passive aspect. One feels she is striving to go beyond the usual display of compositional expertise, and allow the material to play an ever-greater role in the final form of a work. This is a strategy that contains rewards and risks in equal measure, and this exhibition feels slightly inconsistent in quality. Yet one need look no further than Johns's show to realise that consistency in art is a mixed blessing. The journey may be haphazard, but the destination seems more worthy of the effort.