

Piano Removalist

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Catalogue Essay

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The trapdoor

If you find yourself in a conversation about art with Mitch, you'll most likely hear him use the word trapdoor. What a lovely way to explain the unknown in art. The trapdoor as the threshold between night and light. The dark fright of the unfamiliar coupled with the tools of slapstick humour - a black box for the easy appearance of some vile villain or an escape chute for the goodies.

The trapdoor is a sudden, unexplained departure or quite simply the way in which the rug can be abruptly pulled from beneath your feet and if we trust Mitch, we can use the trapdoor as an open invitation to come along for the ride. With little mystery left in the world, it is nice to know that there is still a space where no satchel equipped with answers will accompany us, a place where mystery can turn to anticipation and damn, she cuts a fine figure.

I caught you knockin' at my cellar door

Another door. Another black hole to the underground.

When Mitch talks about his own work, or rather the process of making art he tends to drop the word heroin. An uneasy word perhaps. Although it rightly conjures up the world of compulsive addiction, of little escape. Of contained haemorrhage.

The cellar is the birthplace of the trapdoor. The cellar, as airtight box, summons up the strict physical limitations of the artist studio. The cellar door of Mitch's work is an upright minimalist sooty square, almost a wall that one is up against.

It's just me and my four walls. And I am happy to wait it out.

The studio portrait

Eric Thake often included himself in his cartoons. You will know him by his shallow-crowned hat. He is the man looking on, looking back. With Mitch, the uniform is not as recognisable but the state is. Drunk. Smoking. Slumped in the gutter. In pieces. Deconstructed. Please put me back together again.

..And a Third Deputation, Sir John, wants more oil

A George Molnar cartoon of my grandfather hangs in my living room. My grandfather was a politician. Sir John was a fat man in the 1970s and he sits at his transparent Molnar desk, the outline of his legs and feet visible from behind a white square, a crystal clear cellar door as it were. To his left lies a floor to ceiling window, crowded with protesters heralding their placards. The window is thick in black texta and divided by three lines so as to resemble a prison cell.

That's just a line, repeated.

She's warm alright!

An Eric Thake Christmas Card from 1966. An impossibly restrained monochrome linocut depicting two men in the dark portal of the Australian hotel. One, face down, leans upon his upturned wrist, the other, in full profile pushes his stomach into the lip of the bar, face staring into the distance. A beer stands lonely between them, half empty at the summer's hour of the glare of the white window we see behind them. It is silent but thick. Mumbled, someone murmurs, 'She's warm alright.'

Thake was economical to say the least. His lines are spare but knowingly capture every posture known to the bar together with a subtle flair for neo-classical architectural detail. As an artist who worked full time as a commercial graphic artist he was not known for his prolific output. When asked if he could have produced more (had he worked less) in simple ironic deflection he replied, 'I might have done more, I might have mowed the lawn more.'

One half of a woman's waistline repeated

It is an instruction, an exercise. Exercise. Like mowing the lawn. A musical score. A sensitive musing on the hip veiled by dawn light gauze.

A desire - more latent than Mitch's past use of laconic, Benny Hill-esque HONK-HONK titties.

Those were the days

The boys are all grown up.

'Those were the days' is a little ditty of a book from 1918. The author, George A. Taylor recollects 'the banquets of wit and jingles' through chatty, half-cocked glimpses of the Bohemian Boys and their art clubs during the early 1900s. Taylor was an artist and writer at The Bulletin and thus most of the participants in his reminiscing are also characters who surrounded The Bulletin - artists who worked as cartoonists, writers, poets and those who were all of the above.

The Dawn and Dusk Club was made up of physical (living) and spiritual

(departed) members, although only one spiritual guest was invited to attend each week. Physical members could nominate spiritual members although it appears that strict criteria was adhered to. Poor Dante was rejected, it was agreed that he was a great man, yet unfortunately his lack of humour made him ineligible for membership. Byron too fell short but rather he was blackballed for his selfishness.

Taylor at one point fancied himself a publisher and thus produced the journal, 'HA HA'. One of the reasons for the title he insists was the hilarity that would ensue on the day of release when the newspaper boys of Sydney would have to call, 'HA HA, get your HA HA.'

Another bohemian club was the 'B.B.'s' or the 'Brother Brushes', a group that consisted of a number of cartoonists and artists from The Bulletin including Norman Lindsay and his brother, Lionel. The Brother Brushes met monthly in Bondi and was in essence a sketching club with hooks, as each meeting had a theme. One month's subject, Happiness produced a lovely illustration by the then Bulletin Manager, William Macleod, of a lad catching a fish.

I mentioned the Brother Brushes to Mitch one day. He told me a story about how he had once served a woman at the art shop where he works who tucked under her arm carried a how-to book for oil painting called 'Mother Colour'.

Brother Brushes

Mother Colour

HA HA.