

## Ewen Coates – **Altered States**

Ewen Coates' sculpture of the past decade appears not to have a common style or theme. That's because the work is consistently disparate. Coates shares this preference for different approaches, different contexts, different themes, with a range of artists today. This may be to do with the contemporary idea that it's less about the artist and more about the art. Or because we live in an age of pluralism and that the idea of a signature style shifting only slightly with the seasons has passed away with Modernism. But if that's true it's only part of the story. Picasso in a single year – 1936 to be exact – painted a realistic tonal portrait of Dora Maar, a range of highly abstract cubist and surrealist heads, a number of large minotaur narratives and line illustrations for a poem by Paul Eluard. The next year he painted *Guernica*. Only an historian could link all these approaches to one mind.

Perhaps what we tend to forget about artists – about the most interesting artists – is that they have an abiding impulse to experiment, to open new doors, to disclose new things, and they will use any method or material to do it. These artists understand that it's not their role to provide more of the same like the local baker or village scribe.

It's the unapologetic readiness to experiment with ideas that frames the sculptures of Ewen Coates. Some works are political, others poetic, some carry a dry wit that is instantly recognized, others require more sustained contemplation. Yet a connecting thread is Coates' awareness that first he must capture the viewer's attention and then transport them in some way; that an artwork cannot succeed without shifting our usual perceptions. To this end, he consistently presents very familiar objects and structures, almost as an act of seduction, and once we are drawn in, it's the altered context that gives the work a strange credibility – as if there's a clear logic, a plausible explanation for something that usually confounds us.

This toying with our sensibilities is reminiscent of M C Escher or Rene Magritte. But with these masters of sleight-of-hand illusion, the punchline is evident – you see one thing but perceive another – whereas Ewen Coates wants to take the matter further. If these early artists challenge the unreliability of perception, Coates accepts that phenomenon and then extends the prospect: he uses illusion to open other windows onto new contexts, new ways of contemplating what we unreliably perceive. Yet no natural conclusion is possible; it's all open to speculation – like meaning itself.

***body and Soul***, 2000, could once have been a bed or a stretcher, a familiar form that draws our attention. Yet here, only the frame remains and the central support is tenuous or missing. The structure is no longer a support for the body but paradoxically, could be seen to stand in for the human body itself. The springs that stretch towards a "centre" suggest that a kind of invisible energy is at work, anticipating Dylan

Thomas' *force that through the green fuse drives the flower*. What is "soul" if not an unseen energy housed within a frame?

***dream gun***, 2001, takes the seduction/transformation process further. This object came to Coates in a perverse and surreal dream that upset him so much he had to make the thing in real life, almost as an act of catharsis. At first we see a military weapon (the illogical word *JEEP* somehow reinforces this) and we are drawn to this precision-made instrument, recognizing its clear utilitarian purpose. But a closer inspection reveals it to be a gleaming tool with no function whatever. Its potential use lies only in our minds and in reality it is no more than a highly polished fetish object – and isn't that what firearms are?

***toilet duck egg blues***, 2001 was made in the same year and continued Coates' interest in the surreal. Clearly the artist recognised the toilet seat as a beautiful form in itself, noticing its similarity to an egg and that a narrative of some sort was created when he brought the two together. Again, both objects are very familiar and their functions acknowledged: a device for the wastes is offset against the beginnings of a new life. The egg is fragile and life tenuous; it comes and goes as regular as our daily ablutions and, without warning, it can disappear perfunctorily into the void.

***wrong House***, 2002 also uses wit and conundrum to convey something beyond illusion. We observe a mop leaning against what appears to be a mirror or reflective surface. What can one of the lowliest household objects tell us about ourselves or the world? Placed out of context and leaning against its own image (we do not think of two mops) we can reflect on how we perceive reality; how we rely on observation and logic, and the use of scientific principles such as transferred energy, force, stasis and gravity which are all simultaneously at work in the most ordinary of situations. But are we looking from the reflection towards the real or vice versa? Physicists tell us that perception and reality often change sides.

***overground***, 2005 represents one of Coates' first significant incursions into socio-political territory. This major work was exhibited at the regional galleries of Gippsland and Warrnambool and although a great deal has been written about it, still more aspects can be recognized. One of them is the work's potential reference to terrorist cells. Secret cells, each unaware of the role of other, is a terrorist strategy to ensure survival of the organization as a whole. In *Overground*, the masked heads seem to operate as a collective, but the faces are deadpan and mute. What is going on inside each is a narrative unknown and unseen by the others. As we observe each diorama, we are only aware of one story and as we move to the next, it shunts out the memory of the last. This gives the work an overarching power and importance: it reminds us that autonomous cells may be the key issue the world faces with terrorism and helps explain why these organizations are rarely defeated.

***two delinquent brothers***, 2007 was made as two separate imaginary heads and only on completion did Coates place the heads together. It was then that the work became animated; that a kind of relay,

almost like a magnetic field was set up between the two. Suddenly one appeared to be whispering to the other: something trivial, of vital importance, an anecdote, a secret? The other figure in this context appears to be listening; the eyes take on a look of concentration. Siblings: in what way does relayed information help form the other's point of view; what part is played by secret plottings; what bonds are created or broken by these exchanges; how much of what we say is really our own?

*anchorman*, 2009, is a maquette for a future large scale work. In a sense this sculpture is another enigma: the upper portion of the body seems to have dissolved in the atmosphere, remnants float up, ethereal and lighter than air. But the lower extremities are solid and real, rooted in earthly materiality. Coates shows the muscles, tendons and sinews as a way of evoking flesh-and-blood connectedness to the physical. Yet the bright bronze patina seems to confound this – how can such glossy artifice be grounded? Ancient idols in forgotten tombs are evoked, polished forms that act as go-betweens for the earthly and the unknown.

*disgrace*, 2010 is another maquette which shows this morphing conundrum extended. It began as an experiment when the artist melted wax into a pair of miniature jeans removed from a small doll. To Coates, the wax that oozed out seemed like something dispelled from the body while the tight jeans standing alone acted like a sheath or second skin to house an idealized figure. This work is to be developed into a lifesize piece as a metaphor for the Western world's yearning for an ideal: a flawless society free of fallibility and the kind of improprieties that can shame us.

*streaming* 2010, defies the logic of the medium, typical of the artist's recent work. (Coates has his own foundry which allows him to push the boundaries of metal casting). These small figures seem to be facing into an unseen force so powerful that it literally thrusts the substance of their bodies away from them. The figures seem to reach out, clawing at the air, striving towards some impossibility clearly beyond them. So much in life seems impossible (a clean planet, world peace, overcoming death or decay) and it's a sensation we have all had; the nightmarish realization that certain things in life may never be attained.

At very least, a survey of this kind reveals the evolution of a practice and the patterns of a creative mind. Such minds contravene social boundaries – like criminals, artists don't follow conventional wisdom; they don't play by the rules. Viewing such a survey is like sleuthing: approached like a crime scene investigation, the whole story must be considered before a pattern emerges and a perpetrator can be truly recognized. No doubt, in years to come, the artist will undertake many more such contraventions to challenge and provoke us.