Exhibition
The Ian Potter Museum of Art
The University of Melbourne
15 February to 11 May 2003
BLACKWOOD SKYLINE

Stephen Bush
work in progress #5
The Work in progress exhibition series at the Ian Potter Museum of Art commenced in 2001 in a spirit of advocacy; we wanted to share our interest in the achievement of artists we admired. In practice, the series has brought us closer to the artists involved.

Staging the exhibitions has required careful discussions with artists about their projects, their careers and their ambitions for their art. Along the way, the word 'work' has taken on subtly different meanings. Initially, we wanted to emphasise the ongoing nature of an artist's practice. Increasingly, the word directed us to something very simple; that, in many important ways, art was a matter of what artists do. This is not meant in a dumb, literal sense. Reducing art to a mere job of work is just as deceptive as the opposite pole – envisioning it as a mysterious, alchemical process. The Work in progress series has directed us towards what has been called 'the daily practice' of art: the ongoing reflection on materials, making and meaning that emerges when artists work at their art.

Presenting the art of Stephen Bush triggers further resonances of that word 'work'. His paintings depict sites at which work takes place, the tools and machinery used in the course of work, the products of various work practices, and even the aftermath of work. Certain of his strategies, such as repetition, evoke the forms of work peculiar to industrial economies, while others, in his history paintings, reflect on the conventions by which paintings 'work' as narrative or allegory. And throughout this exhibition, visitors are invited to meditate on the combination of mental and manual work peculiar to painting.

Art is often spoken of in ways that imply that it is a task involving immense sacrifice. We read romantic accounts of artists working in isolation, working obsessively or at the expense of their health. It's been my pleasure to see Stephen Bush at work over many years, a pleasure heightened by the knowledge that he will have nothing of such myths. In Bush's art I see purposeful, challenging work; work that is never fully left behind but which, in its everyday quality, is at the core of his life, rather than being at odds with it.

We are grateful for the insightful and generous response to Stephen Bush's work developed by Peter Hutchings in his catalogue essay. The work required to present this exhibition has, once again, been undertaken by diverse staff at the Potter. Such an exhibition brings together staff in the curatorial, administrative, technical, educational and collections management divisions of the Potter. It is their work, alongside that of the artists, that has made the Work in progress series such a positive experience.
It was the beginning of an end, and after it everything would bear testimony to what had been lost. Turning to art after philosophy, the German philosopher Hegel would find that art was already over, as he stated in his first lecture on the subject:

The peculiar nature of artistic production and of works of art no longer fills our highest need. … it is certainly the case that art no longer affords that satisfaction of spiritual needs which earlier ages and nations sought in it, and found in it alone …

In all these respects art, considered in its highest vocation, is and remains for us a thing of the past. Thereby it has lost for us genuine truth and life, and has rather been transferred into our ideas instead of maintaining its earlier necessity in reality and occupying its higher place.¹

It’s an extraordinary opening to a course of lectures on art, amounting to an announcement that the subject was finished and that everyone could now go home. And yet the class stayed on to hear how art had ended, and to consider what they might do for the remainder. In poetic terms, Hegel’s aesthetics establishes elegy as the dominant mode of all future art. Henceforth, art would always be concerned, to a greater or lesser extent, with loss.

Read again today, Hegel’s pronouncement is an untimely meditation: at once relevant, obsolete, and relevant again. At the opening of a discourse on aesthetics — that is, on the perception of art — Hegel speaks of a disenchantment in a viewer’s relation to art that might now be equally pertinent to an artist’s relation to art (here, to painting). For the viewer, art is less a part of everyday reality and so more abstract and less immediately meaningful. Painting after Hegel seemed to play out this logic, moving from representational practices still referring to reality to practices of abstraction, confirming art’s transfer into the realm of ideas. At one stage in this story, it seemed that painting could only continue as a form of idiocy, as the solipsistic pursuit of art for its maker’s own sake.

As if inspired by Hegel’s general reflections upon art, first delivered 180 years ago, Stephen Bush’s art works to reinstate painting, and to reiterate Hegel’s specific view of the capacity of that medium, which answers:

the demand that a character should develop and proceed outwardly to deeds and actions, and inwardly to a deepening of the soul. For this reason we are at once more at home in painting. Painting, that is to say, opens the way for the first time to the principle of finite and inherently infinite subjectivity, the principle of our own life and existence, and in painting we see what is effective and active in ourselves.²

Painting, then, rather than sculpture, introduces both a particular, progressive form of external historicity and internal subjectivity to art. It’s worth noting that Hegel wrote this after dismissing classical sculpture, which he misunderstood as unpainted, for ‘leav[ing] us somewhat cold’. His chief objection was to the apparently sightless, unpainted eyes of classical statuary. But this repudiation of monochromatic art alone suggests the extent to which Bush’s practice is no naive neo-hegelianism, neither an arch, nor simply ironically retro-chic, repetition of romanticism. For Bush has sought exactly those historical and spiritual dimensions considered by Hegel to be the exclusive preserve of polychromatic art through and in monochromatic, representational painting.
But to discuss Stephen Bush’s painting specifically is, at this point, to get somewhat ahead of a discussion of contemporary painting, the very field advanced and disrupted by his practice.

On the way towards the abstract endpoint of Hegel’s trajectory for art, painting’s visual dimension took over from its conceptual aspects. Marcel Duchamp, whose practice responded to his rejection of the increasingly inward focus of art, put in a plea for an art capable of moving from eye to mind:

Since Courbet, it’s been believed that painting is addressed to the retina. That was everyone’s error. The retinal shudder! Before, painting had other functions: it could be religious, philosophical, moral.\(^3\)

Similarly, and perhaps surprisingly given his exceptional technical proficiency, Bush yearns for a form of painterly complexity that doesn’t begin and end with the eye:

… part of me wants to escape from a lot of the painting of this century because it seems to be so well picked over. Painting in earlier eras was complex, it was about telling a story, or recording an historical event, and I find that a lot more involving.\(^4\)

Abstraction may have presented ideas about art, but its visual minimalism ensured that the eye wasn’t too excited, or busy. Bush doesn’t turn from delighting the eye; rather, his paintings provoke thought through their visual pleasures, exciting both retina and brain. The difference here is that abstraction refers to ideas about art, whereas Bush attempts to refer to history and ideology even as his work necessarily refers to ideas about art. In reflecting upon a form of art that was part of a more complex reality – and not just the resident of a rarefied, weightless aesthetic dimension – Bush’s painting tells stories of a lost world, of a lost art.

While this account of Bush’s practice might be seeming to stray into hyperbole – almost as if repeating the Napoleonic rhetoric of This big in the afterlife, 1990 (p. 21, cat. 28), featuring Stephen Bush as the new saviour-hero of painting – let’s consider how a contemporary commitment to painting might be able to redress the many stupidities of art.

Humour is a key element as should be expected from a practice organised around travesty. Courbet might have appeared in his own studio tableaux, but history painters have not usually dressed up as their own subjects, both male and female. Nor have they presented us with baggy, elephant-suited burlesques of romanticism. It would seem that Bush takes himself sufficiently seriously to not take himself seriously. The result is that his paintings often disarm with their charm and, by their humour, connect us with our own experiences of his images (art-historical and/or comical). As Jonathan Goodman put it:

Bush is, of course, making fun of the whole business of memorializing an event, yet he is deeply serious about the role of the art as witness. Even in a sepia-coloured depiction of so mundane an object as a tractor, his wish to justify and immortalize is as powerful as his desire to lampoon. It’s the balance Bush constructs out of these opposing impulses that make him interesting as an artist.\(^5\)

These paintings have great entertainment value: they are often crowd pleasers in the nineteenth-century style of the theatrical grand tableau (now enjoying a renaissance within the museum’s walls in the hucksterish curatorial concept of the ‘destination painting’). The presentation of history paintings in the context of a diorama – a popular nineteenth-century spectacle – is one of the artist’s reference points. Painting as a popular entertainment involves a commitment to art’s immediate impact, and to an expansion of painting beyond its museal, post-hegelian limits.
Venetian red paintings stacked before being installed at Robert Lindsay Gallery, Melbourne, 1995
cat. 15 Pomme de terre #6 1998
oil on linen, 78.7 x 119.4 cm
Collection of Rupert and Annabel Myer
© Stephen Bush/Licensed by VISCOPY, Sydney 2003
cat. 7 Japanese green 2000
oil on linen, 91.5 x 122 cm
Courtesy the artist and Mori Galley, Sydney
© Stephen Bush/Licensed by VISCOPY, Sydney 2003
cat. 13 The lure of Paris #1 1998
oil on linen, 183 x 183 cm
Courtesy the artist
© Stephen Bush/Licensed by VISCOPY, Sydney 2003
cat. 9 Seed 2000
oil on MDF, 183 x 140 x 40 cm
Courtesy the artist, Sutton Gallery, Melbourne and Mori Gallery, Sydney
© Stephen Bush/Licensed by VISCOPY, Sydney 2003
cat. 5 Bait 2000
oil on MDF, 183 x 140 x 40 cm
Courtesy the artist, Sutton Gallery, Melbourne and Mori Gallery, Sydney
© Stephen Bush/Licensed by VISCOPY, Sydney 2003
cat. 12 Sounds like Nebelhorn 1999
oil on linen, 198.3 x 198.3 cm
Collection of Bendigo Art Gallery
R-S Abbott Bequest Fund 2002
© Stephen Bush/Licensed by VISCOPY, Sydney 2003
**cat. 4** Pomme de terre #9 2001
oil on linen, 78.7 x 119.4 cm
Private collection
© Stephen Bush/Licensed by VISCOPY, Sydney 2003

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**cat. 34** Sunday at the Eclipse Mill 1983
oil on linen, 102.2 x 152.4 cm
The University of Melbourne Art Collection
Gift of Leslie Rowe 1997
© Stephen Bush/Licensed by VISCOPY, Sydney 2003
cat. 12 Fog a fogy notion 1997
oil on linen, 147 x 182 cm
Collection of Athol Hawke and Eric Harding
© Stephen Bush/Licensed by VISCOPY, Sydney 2003
cat. 16 *Deep Deeper* 1997
oil on linen, 117 x 137 cm

Courtesy the artist and Sutton Gallery, Melbourne
© Stephen Bush/Licensed by VISCOPY, Sydney 2003
cat. 31 Ploughing the second land 1985–86
oil on linen, 137.5 x 203 cm
Geelong Gallery Collection. Purchased with the assistance of the Victorian Regional Galleries Art Foundation Fund and the Friends of the Arts, 1993
© Stephen Bush/Licensed by VISCOPY, Sydney 2003
cat. 29 Claiming 1989
oil on linen, 183 x 183 cm
Courtesy the artist and Sutton Gallery, Melbourne
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Catalogue of works in the exhibition

Dimensions of work are given in centimetres; height precedes width precedes depth

1. The lure of Paris #22 2002
   oil on linen
   183 x 183
   Courtesy the artist and Sutton Gallery, Melbourne

2. Pomme de terre #13 2002  p. 11
   oil on linen
   78.7 x 119.4
   Collection of Greg Rosshandler

3. The lure of Paris #21 2001
   oil on linen
   183 x 183
   Private collection

4. Pomme de terre #9 2001  p. 17
   oil on linen
   78.7 x 119.4
   Private collection

5. Bait 2000  p. 15
   oil on MDF
   183 x 140 x 40
   Courtesy the artist, Sutton Gallery, Melbourne and Mori Gallery, Sydney

6. Cassel earth 2000
   oil on linen
   91.5 x 122
   Courtesy the artist and Mori Galley, Sydney

   oil on linen
   91.5 x 122
   Courtesy the artist and Mori Galley, Sydney

8. The lure of Paris #19 2000
   oil on linen
   183 x 183
   Private collection

   oil on MDF
   183 x 140 x 40
   Courtesy the artist, Sutton Gallery, Melbourne and Mori Gallery, Sydney

10. The lure of Paris #18 1999
    oil on linen
    183 x 183
    Collection of Darren Light and Sara Graham

11. The lure of Paris #16 1999
    oil on linen
    183 x 183
    Collection of Rupert and Annabel Myer

12. Sounds like Nebelhorn 1999  p. 16
    oil on linen
    198.3 x 198.3
    Collection of Bendigo Art Gallery
    RHS Abbott Bequest Fund 2002

    oil on linen
    183 x 183
    Courtesy the artist

14. The lure of Paris #13 1998
    oil on linen
    183 x 183
    Private collection

15. Pomme de terre #6 1998  p. 10
    oil on linen
    78.7 x 119.4
    Collection of Rupert and Annabel Myer

    oil on linen
    117 x 137
    Courtesy the artist and Sutton Gallery, Melbourne

17. Got a foggy notion 1997  p. 18
    oil on linen
    147 x 182
    Collection of Athol Hawke and Eric Harding

18. The lure of Paris #10 1997
    oil on linen
    183 x 183
    Collection of Brendan Shanahan

19. Just wait till now becomes then 1996
    oil on linen
    198 x 239
    Private collection

20. Venetian red #44 1995
    oil on linen
    51 x 76.5
    Courtesy the artist and Sutton Gallery, Melbourne
21. Venetian red #41 1995
   oil on linen
   91 x 101
   Courtesy the artist and Sutton Gallery, Melbourne

22. Venetian red #9 1995
   oil on linen
   51 x 56
   Private collection

23. Venetian red #7 1995
   oil on linen
   61 x 51
   Courtesy the artist and Sutton Gallery, Melbourne

24. Venetian red #6 1995
   oil on linen
   122 x 122
   Courtesy the artist and Sutton Gallery, Melbourne

25. Venetian red #5 1995
   oil on linen
   91 x 122
   Courtesy the artist and Sutton Gallery, Melbourne

26. Venetian red #2 1995
   oil on linen
   91 x 107
   Collection of Athol Hawke and Eric Harding

27. Plains of promise #1 1990 p. 19
   oil on linen
   150 x 200
   Private collection

28. This big in the afterlife 1990 p. 21
   oil on linen
   183 x 183
   Private collection

29. Claiming 1989 p. 23
   oil on linen
   183 x 183
   Courtesy the artist and Sutton Gallery, Melbourne

30. From the field to figuration 1987
   oil on linen
   183 x 183
   Collection of Sir James and Lady Cruthers

   oil on linen
   137.5 x 203
   Geelong Gallery Collection
   Purchased with the assistance of the
   Victorian Regional Galleries Art Foundation
   Fund and the Friends of the Arts, 1993

32. Cinnamon 1985
   oil on linen
   50.5 x 83.5
   Courtesy the artist

33. Yellow 1984
   oil on linen
   122 x 198
   Courtesy the artist and Sutton Gallery, Melbourne

34. Sunday at the Eclipse Mill 1983 p. 17
   oil on linen
   102.2 x 152.4
   The University of Melbourne Art Collection
   Gift of Leslie Rowe 1997

35. Vacuum 1980
    acrylic and oil on linen
    122 x 122
    Courtesy the artist and Sutton Gallery, Melbourne
Stephen Bush  
Born Colac, Victoria 1958. Lives Melbourne

Studies  
1979 Graduate Diploma of Fine Art, Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology (RMIT)  
1976-78 Bachelor of Arts (Fine Art), RMIT

Selected solo exhibitions  
2002 Brighter later, Sutton Gallery, Melbourne  
2001 Grey flannel, Mori Gallery, Sydney  
1999 Overlander, Rosamund Felsen Gallery, Los Angeles, USA  
1996 A picture exhibition, Fotouhi Cramer Gallery, New York, USA  
1995 Venetian red, Robert Lindsay Gallery, Melbourne  
1994 The lure of Paris, Robert Lindsay Gallery, Melbourne  
1991 Stephen Bush, Powell Street Gallery, Melbourne  
Claiming. An installation of paintings by Stephen Bush, Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Melbourne; Contemporary Art Centre of South Australia, Adelaide; the Aldrich Museum of Contemporary Art, Ridgefield, USA  
1989 Stephen Bush, Powell Street Gallery, Melbourne  
1987 Plow, Powell Street Gallery, Melbourne  
1984 Stephen Bush, Powell Street Gallery, Melbourne

Selected group exhibitions  
2002 The Monash University Collection: four decades of collecting, Monash University Museum of Art, Melbourne  
2001 Unpacked; Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney  
Booyslicious: a context for new additions to the University of Melbourne Art Collection, The Ian Potter Museum of Art, the University of Melbourne  
Our place: issues of identity in recent Australian art, Monash University Museum of Art, Melbourne & Palazzo Vaj, Prato, Italy  
2000 H2O: a miscellany of works from the Kerry Stokes Collection, Lawrence Wilson Art Gallery, University of Western Australia, Perth  
Sebastian -- contemporary realist painting, Gold Coast City Art Gallery & tour  
Redlands Art Prize, Mosman Art Gallery, Sydney  
Menagerie at Treasury, Gold Treasury Museum, Melbourne  
1999 Leisure and pleasure, Robert Lindsay Gallery, Melbourne  
Melbourne international biennial: signs of life, 118 Russell Street, Melbourne  
On the road: the car in Australian art, Museum of Modern Art at Heide, Melbourne  
1998 Cartoons and caricature in contemporary art, Geelong Gallery & tour  
Views of Melbourne, National Exhibitions Touring Support (NETS) Victoria tour  
Garth, West Space, Melbourne  
1997 The Vizard Foundation Art Collection of the 1990s, the Ian Potter Museum of Art, the University of Melbourne tour  
John McCaughey Memorial Art Prize, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne  
1996 After image: painting photography, Centre for Contemporary Photography, Melbourne & tour  
Tangibility?: three installations, Plimsoll Gallery, Centre for the Arts, University of Tasmania, Hobart  
Food in art, Mornington Peninsula Regional Gallery  
Photography is dead! Long live photography! Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney  
Compost: artists’ week 1996, Telstra Adelaide Festival  
How say you, Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Melbourne & tour  
Colonial post colonial, Museum of Modern Art at Heide, Melbourne  
Works on paper, Robert Lindsay Gallery, Melbourne  
1995 South face: Stephen Bush and Jan Nelson, Canberra Contemporary Art Space  
Recent acquisitions, Deakin University Gallery, Geelong  
NON, other ohnetell, Melbourne  
The Loti and Victor Smorgon gift of contemporary Australian art, Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney  
Decadence, 200 Gertrude Street, Melbourne  
If you’re creative you can get stuffed!, Continental Café, Melbourne
1994 Moët & Chandon touring exhibition, national tour
Tableaux: works from the collection, Monash University Gallery, Melbourne
Persona cognita, Museum of Modern Art at Heide, Melbourne
Bad toys, Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Melbourne
1993 Survey 14: images of the Geelong region, Geelong Gallery
Interim space, Smith Street Post Office, Melbourne
A collaboration project – Jan Nelson and Stephen Bush, Temple Studio, Melbourne
Recent acquisitions, Geelong Gallery
Recent acquisitions, Monash University Gallery, Melbourne
Group show, Darren Knight Gallery, Melbourne
1992 Works on paper, RMIT Gallery, Melbourne
Domino 1: collaborations between artists, Ian Potter Gallery, the University of Melbourne Museum of Art
The angelic space: a celebration of Piero della Francesca, Monash University Gallery, Melbourne
1991 Contemporary landscapes, Deakin University Gallery, Geelong
The story so far …, Waverley City Gallery, Melbourne
1990 Stephen Bush, Platform, Melbourne
Artists against animal experimentation, Deutscher Gallery, Melbourne
Scotchmen's Hill Vineyard Art Prize, Geelong Gallery
1988 Australian art post-1960, Deutscher Gertrude Street, Melbourne
Artisans, George Paton Gallery, Melbourne
Stephen Bush/Janet Burchill, the Lewers Bequest and Penrith Regional Art Gallery, Emu Plains & 200 Gertrude Street, Melbourne
Recent acquisitions, Monash University Gallery, Melbourne
Newcastle Award, Newcastle Gallery
1987 Large paintings from Artbank, Ivan Dougherty Gallery, Sydney
Quiddity: a still life exhibition, 200 Gertrude Street, Melbourne
The new romantics, Macquarie Galleries, Sydney & tour
Voyage of discovery, Crescent Gallery, Dallas, USA
1986 Fears and scruples, University Gallery, the University of Melbourne
Young Australians, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne & tour
1985 New work, Powell Street Gallery, Melbourne
Contemporary Australian views, Geelong Gallery & tour
1983 The John McCaughey memorial art prize, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne
1982 Powell Street Gallery, Melbourne
1981 Emerging painters, RMIT Gallery, Melbourne

Grants and awards
International program grant, Arts Victoria, 1999
Project grant, Visual Arts/Craft Board of the Australia Council, 1997
Studio residency, Cité Internationale des Arts, Paris, France, 1993
Project grant, Visual Arts/Craft Board of the Australia Council, 1988

Collections
Artbank
Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide
Art Gallery of Western Australia, Perth
Australian Council of Trade Unions, Melbourne
Australian Embassy, Beijing, China
Cairns Regional Gallery
Deakin University, Melbourne
Geelong Gallery
JL Stewart, New York, USA
The Lott and Victor Smorgon Collection of Contemporary Art, Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney
Monash University, Melbourne
National Gallery of Australia, Canberra
National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne
Newcastle Region Art Gallery
PricewaterhouseCoopers, Melbourne
Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane
The University of Melbourne
Veterinary Research Institute, Melbourne
Vizard Foundation Art Collection of the 1990s, on loan to the Ian Potter Museum of Art, The University of Melbourne
Walter and Eliza Hall Institute, Melbourne
Warrnambool Art Gallery
Western Metropolitan College of TAFE, Melbourne
WMC Resources, Melbourne
Selected bibliography

Newspaper articles and reviews

Kidd, C., ‘In a word, Bush’s paintings are brillo’, Sydney Morning Herald, 26 June 2001, p. 22.

Journal and magazine articles and reviews

— ‘The year that was’, Gallery, National Gallery Society of Victoria, 1990.

Exhibition catalogues

Cameron, D., Historical non-imperatives, the Aldrich Museum of Contemporary Art, Ridgefield, USA, 1991.
Cass, N., Fears and scruples, University Gallery, University of Melbourne, 1986.
Holmes, J., ‘Keep in touch’, Tangibility?: three installations, Plimsoll Gallery, Centre for the Arts, the University of Tasmania, Hobart, 1996.
King, N., Bad toys, Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Melbourne, 1994.
Lindsay, R., Young Australians, Powell Street Gallery, Melbourne, 1987.
Pennings, M., Overlander, Rosamund Felsen Gallery, Los Angeles, USA, 1999.
Timms, P., ‘Narratives in time and narratives in space’, The story so far ..., Waverley City Gallery, Melbourne, 1991.
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